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# THE MANDARIN'S BELL

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# THE MANDARIN'S BELL

BY

EDWARD NOBLE

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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*Printed in Great Britain*

To

SIR ALECK AND LADY WALKER

*In memory of many beautiful days on the Lake and Fells of hill-girt Ullswater; in memory, too, of those distant, splendid years when you and I, Aleck, were pals on Eastern seas, in Melbourne and in Sydney— this little book is inscribed with my love.*

*Yours,*

EDWARD NOBLE.

HESWALL,
1924.

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# PART I

# THE MANDARIN'S BELL

## A MEMORY

Around the Point from Java
You dip to the deep blue sea,
With monkeys bought at Anjer
Beneath a banyan tree,
And curios rare
From the village there,
With a cockatoo or three,
You spread your sails
And dream of dales
And your English sweetheart see.

### I

A MAN moved down the pathway leading from mean streets to the docks. His progress was slow. The left side of him stirred less freely than the right. Each time his right leg carried him forward a slight lift of his body appeared ; the left foot scraped the gravel, the left shoulder rose somewhat, the left arm twitched at his side. There came, too, a small contraction of the facial muscles, a jerk, and the right side had again resumed its burden. It was the progression of

one maimed. The progression of one with a cork leg—scrape, jerk, twist ; a shake of the left hand, a contraction instantly subdued and put out of court by the right.

It was the progression of one with a marionette left side joined to a thinking, active and resolute right. Yet the man was sound. His limbs were normal in all particulars.

A curly haired retriever marched beside him.

At the edge of a dismal grass plot, cinder-strewn, smut-laden, lying in the fork of railway lines, the man stopped and looked across the Great Float. The dog lay down, nose on paws, intent on his master.

The sun was setting out there beyond the Orme. Bidston and the more distant Welsh Hills stood out blue against the crimson and chrome of the vault which stooped to meet them. Over Hoylake Flats a veil of mist pushed out lean fingers to clothe the farther hollows. It stole across Wirral like the smoke of a giant couch driven before a breeze. Ridges of higher ground crowned by hamlets, trees, spires, thrust through it—line beyond line to the Dee, where the smoke of Mostyn joined it and rolled upon the river, blotting its mirror.

The man could not see the Welsh Hills nor Upton, nor the Stone of Thor, nor the Dee, nor any part of that mist-veiled landscape. Bidston rose between him and it—the hill where the windmill stands motionless on guard over Wirral ;

but he knew they were there. It was graven on a memory which stood him instead of sight. It was part of the beautiful past which once he had known as life and now remembered as a dream.

He would have climbed Bidston to refresh his memory ; but that was difficult now. It took long, seeing that one side of him persisted in behaving as a marionette when the strings are pulled. Nor was it possible often to spare the time. Even a marionette must live, and to that end must earn wages.

He closed his eyes as he stood on the cinder-strewn patch of brown grass, faced the hill and looked down the slope of years. He saw the thing he looked for and found it beautiful. His face had the placid gaze of one who is blind. But he was not blind. Had he been blind the force which had administered to him the blow which had made him marionette would have had no further need of his services. It would have passed over him, left him quiet—still as the wings of that mill which stood up there blue against the chromes of the sky.

. . . .

The people who lived in the mean street which gave him shelter spoke of the man as Old Gargoyle; but no soul in that teeming centre knew what the word meant. It is possible that he himself had found it in a moment of oppressed consciousness, for his tongue occasionally stung in spite of the

accustomed serenity he exhibited. Skipper was a more favoured habitant of the street than his master. Men and women had a good word for the dog while his master incurred their contempt. But the children were wiser. They took into their confidence both man and dog, chatting with the one, petting and teasing the other.

It is fine to be able to win friendship from the understudies of mankind when mankind himself insists on standing aloof. Especially is this so if you are alone in the world. It is very humiliating to acknowledge that you are friendless amidst a crowd. Old Gargoyle, who was not old in years, knew this and hugged the opportunities the lads gave him. It seemed that he had the gift of sympathy and, in a sense, he was their master. He held an informal class of boys and taught them one of the subjects he knew. He talked of ships and the sea and countries far away where the skies were blue and bananas grew in golden clusters on the high, palm-like trees of the tropics. The boys loved to hear him talk, because they loved the sea. Monkeys came into the curriculum, snakes, the sea of the Thousand Islands, forests so dense that it was only with difficulty men could make way there. Then there were the albatross, molly-mauks, Cape pigeons—birds which followed ships for weeks, never slept, scarcely moved their wings and only rested when the winds were still. These things fascinated the boys. They wished to be sailors. They thought it would be fine to go aloft

on the yards Old Gargoyle pointed out to them, to fight a gale and to see strange lands.

The world was very beautiful then in their eyes.

. . . .

Across the dock a bell sounded. The man twisted on his heel and faced it. The absorbed expression faded and left him intent, puzzled, uncertain. Two bells—five o'clock, given with a note which recalled strange happenings. Then came the blare of a steam hooter advising workers that their task was done.

That at all events was no strange sound. There was nothing in its voice which spoke of the past—something, rather, which pushed away the past and urgently spoke of the present. Five o'clock. The man would be late at his post after all.

Scrape, jerk, twist ; a shake of the left hand with each step as Old Gargoyle moved on to his work. The dog sedately picked his way, refusing the entangling points with which the road was strewn. Together they crossed the burnt oasis and entered upon a desert of lines which bordered the quayside.

The man seemed troubled. He was going to take up duty on a new ship—and he was late. That of itself was abhorrent ; but it was not the whole difficulty. That bell signal bothered him. Two bells. Five o'clock. Where had he heard those tones before ?

Together man and dog approached the sheds which skirted the Great Float on the north, and entered them. They passed, sniffing amidst grain sacks stacked high on every hand. Gangs of lumpers trundled little trucks carrying sacks and wheeled them away into that space where a regiment of them already stood. The man and his dog moved stiffly down the lane of labourers and came to the exit. Great doors were being closed, rolling on wheels. Clerks, stevedores, lumpers stood to see him pass. Some nodded. Some laughed. One or two crowed ; but Old Gargoyle moved onward, came to the wide gangway, mounted it and boarded his ship.

The mate awaited him. He crossed the deck clad for a run up town. " Your name Maginis ? " he questioned abruptly.

The old man scraped nearer, touching his cap in salute—

" They call me Old Gargoyle," he answered, and again the puzzle dawned in look and attitude. " Maginis ? " he shook the strange thing from him. " I don't know—but I'm the night-watchman, sir, as you'll see by this."

He handed a paper which the mate scanned.

" That's all right. Good—I've been waiting for you. I like punctuality, Magin—— " he glanced at the paper, " William Gargoyle. I shall expect you up to time if you want to keep your job. Here are the keys—saloon, captain's cabin, pantry, houses . . . they're labelled. See

you don't let them out of your hand. Keep an eye on the moorings. There's a fire in the galley, but I don't want you to sit down there and sleep all night. Keep alert. This dock is too open. The whole place in infested with thieves—so you'll have to keep your eyes skinned." He returned the paper and searched the man's face.

" Very good, sir."

" Right. Carry on."

The mate stooped, picked up a small bag and walked down the gangway. He was satisfied.

William Gargoyle stood watching him until he turned an angle of the shed, then came back to the foot of the gangway and sat down with his feet on the deck. Skipper snuggled up to him, thrusting a cold nose into his hand, and the man leaned over to say : " He called me Maginis . . . Why ? "

He sat absorbed over the puzzle until the dog reminded him that it was tea time, that a galley was warmer than the deck and led him to it. Then, when at length they rested before the fire, it dawned upon the watchman that his dog had marched unhesitatingly in the right direction. That was queer. He looked down at Skipper and commented :

" How did you know which way to come, eh ? "

The dog drew near, wagging effusively, then nosed about, giving tongue with little yaps of pleasure. He ran to the door swishing his tail, leaped the high wash-board and chased along the

decks going aft. He examined the doors beneath the break of the poop, found them locked and at once scrambled up the steep ladder which led to the poop. He barked as he ran.

Old Gargoyle rose from his seat and stood watching, puzzled, shaking his head.

The dusk had come. Clouds nearly blotted out the crimson and gold of a sky which showed here through a maze of dimly traced yards and ropes and masts and ratlines which mounted high, high into the dark. Over there was Bidston Hill, crowned by a windmill which scarcely showed its form. Close at hand were gaunt warehouses, elevators, cranes, engines, trucks—all the paraphernalia of the docks, blue and indistinct now against the heavens.

He whistled to the dog and Skipper arrived panting but inarticulate at his side. He stood up, pawing the old man's sleeve, his tongue out, his ears cocked, his eyes wise—wise over jaws that slavered.

"Whisht! What ails the creature . . . Down, sir—down," ordered his master, and the dog obeyed, whimpering like a scolded child.

"I believe," said the watchman, noting him, "there must be r-a-t-s on board this ship." Skipper refused the spelled out word. "I believe," said the man again, but casually, "there are rats on board this ship—rats, eh?" but the dog fawned upon him, refusing to be drawn.

"Obviously," said the night-watchman, "it

isn't rats. It's something else . . . Very singular ! "

He mused on the portent.

They returned to the galley and the man prepared lamps for the gangways, stirred the fire and made tea. Then he sat down to read a thumbed paper which had been left by the vanished crew, smoked and pushed the puzzle from him. The dog remained alert and pleading at his feet until, at eight o'clock, his master rose and started on his rounds ; then bounded away as before, exhibiting every mark of excitement.

" Come in ! " said the man at this. He whistled and the dog answered, slinking shamedly to heel. " Stay there ! What sort of use are you to me if ye go cavortin' round like a spoiled lap-dog ? Go steady ! " he demanded.

. . . .

They were in charge of one of the grain ships which had come smoking round the Horn and up the two Atlantics with food for the British nation, and the man acknowledged his responsibilities. The vessel lay beside one of the great mills of the north for discharge, at a wharf where, for the past eighteen months, perhaps more, Old Gargoyle had found employment as night-watchman. Not a very onerous position. One requiring little of a man but sobriety and the habit of wakefulness. One occupied largely by *les oubliers* of the British Merchant Service ; persons who for one reason

or another have failed to retain the grip they have secured on the ladder of life.

The ship which had been given into his custody had a name ; but the night-watchman did not know it. It may have been mentioned in his presence by the clerk who gave him his orders ; but if so it had fallen on unresponsive ears. He was not greatly concerned with names. They had ceased to bother him. Witness the readiness with which he answered to the soubriquet the street had found him. Old Gargoyle ! A scupper, a thing that spouts . . . could any be less appropriate ? The intelligence of Skipper was don-like in comparison with the stupidity of his master since Force had dealt its blow.

He marched the deck of this ship, lifting his lantern and prying into the dark spaces of the wharf. He swung rays on the fiferails, searched amidst the tangle of ropes by the pumps, climbed to the standard compass up there upon the skidds, twisting a ray here, there and away. He crossed the poop, tried the doors of a chart-room, the sashes of a skylight ; came aft and saw on the wheel gratings the emergency life-buoy with its attachment of pyrophore ; handled the cannister, the little red flag and read the ship's name spread in a large semi-circle across the buoy—*Mandarin*, and beneath it, Liverpool.

The dog stood with his fore paws on the wheel-grating beside his master. Of the twain he was hot, panting. He pawed at the white buoy,

looking for permission to mount, and the man, in a playful rejoinder said : "Go on then . . . good boy." Instantly Skipper leaped upon the grating, twirled within the buoy and lay down with his nose supported on one side of it.

"Seems to know all about it," the man commented. "Very singular."

Then, after a lengthy wait, he added : "I never knew him so frisky on a new ship before. Generally he hates the very sight of them."

He walked up and down the poop for some time. Skipper remained content in the life-buoy. The ship's yards towered above them, a network of rigging climbing high against the sky. Wind hummed through it—a note which sometimes became a wail. The gaunt waist of the ship fascinated the old man. It was painted white and smothered with grain dust which caught the lamp glare and showed a vast well which would be open to the charging seas down there at the foot of the world whence she had come. Old Gargoyle leaned over the break of the poop, staring into this well, oppressed by a new burden. He could not understand it. It began with the sound of a bell. It became importunate when the dog acted as he had. . . . Something was added when the mate addressed him as Maginis. Then the ship's name bothered him—*Mandarin*. He wondered why. He wondered presently whether he had watched this ship before. It was possible, of course. He had been watching ships

all his life—it seemed. At five o'clock each day for years of months and months of years, he had climbed the gangway of some ship lying off the Mill Wharf, saluted the officer who awaited him, watched him disappear, watched the sheds disgorging labourers ; heard some laugh, others crow, and had gone into the galley to brew the pot of tea which would stand on the stove all night for his comfort.

Nothing very mysterious about Gargoyle, you perceive. A night-watchman in effect. One of those whose duty it is to mount guard while others sleep. It was the dock-folk who made the mystery, the lumpers who crowed when he passed, the women who stood to talk on door steps, the cadaverous and close-eyed grocer whose shop was at the end of the street. Old Gargoyle knew of no mystery. He recognised that if he would live he must work—and there were so many things he could not do. But he made a first-rate watchman. He had no knowledge how he came to be watchman. The whole thing was a puzzle, which had grown to-night. It was as though a curtain had lain across his life and now Chance had lifted one corner. He peeped under, questioning. He had a new feeling—the dark decks were peopled in some way by faces, phantoms, shapes from beyond. He felt lonely without his dog and scraped aft to find him—scrape, jerk, twist ; a shake of the left hand, the marionette left which once had been whole. So he came to the wheel-

gratings and persuaded Skipper to accompany him.

He went back to the break of the poop, his scraping gait still evident, the dog inquisitive at his heels. He spoke to him, urging quiet, and turned the lantern upon a bell which hung in a brass standard fixed to the rail. He bent forward in examination.

Across the curved metal was the ship's name graven in blue with a tinge of red ; the same name which appeared on the emergency buoy by the wheel-gratings. *Mandarin*. But beneath it here was the date of the ship's birth. The watchman seemed fascinated by the inscription. He read it out for Skipper's benefit, pronouncing the word plainly as though tasting it. "*Mandarin*," he said again and again. "*Mandarin*, old boy, eh ?" The dog stared, wise in his wider knowledge, pawing at his master's sleeve. "*Mandarin*," the man repeated, and added wistfully, "I wonder where we've heard that name before ?"

A steamer at the tips on the south side of the Great Float struck the time on her bell—four sonorous strokes. From up and down the dock came iterations of the sound. Watchmen everywhere were announcing ten o'clock. From the river, so near at hand, it was repeated. From dock-head came the solemn boom of a clock which struck for landsmen's ears . . . even the barges lying in locks awaiting the tide tinkled out the signal on small, shrill bells.

The watchman, with Skipper fawning upon him, waited for the chorus to subside. The breeze hummed high up in the rigging. A loose rope slatted steadily on the shroud which held it. Lights gleamed in the waters of the dock—tricky, flickering lights which gave a touch of mystery to the sombre greyness of the night. The last ship had announced its time and Old Gargoyle stood beside the *Mandarin's* bell, his fingers holding the lanyard by which men strike.

He held it breathless. A sort of awe had taken him. Waves of unaccustomed feeling mounted to his brain. He was conscious of an immense tension ; of a pressure which dragged at him with unseen hands. He looked down at the dog and laughed—a queer note, verging on falsetto.

" We'll strike it too, my boy, eh what ! " he asked. And by his tense attitude it seemed that Skipper awaited the sound. It came in double strokes, as is the fashion on ships—ding, ding . . . ding, ding.

A mellow and beautiful cadence. A clang which in some way brought red sparks which crackled and spirted before the man's eyes, in his brain, and found response all down that left side of him, which was hurt. Just the clang of a bell, which at sea produced relief for the man at the wheel, relief for the lookout, a sigh of relief from the officer who knows that half his watch has sped. The clang of the *Mandarin's* bell.

And when he had struck it the man's hand

slipped back. He shrank, shivering as though the lanyard had stung him, and lurched against a capstan which stood near. Then he stumbled, fell, and at once became supine.

The dog crouched over him, licking a hand that twitched.

. . . .

He woke at length from the drowsiness which had smitten him. Dawn was creeping high in the east ; men were moving like ants, far off at the dock gates. Smoke ascended from the funnels of galleys and donkey-engines on every hand. A new day had begun.

The watchman rose and rubbed his eyes. Skipper leaped from his long scrutiny, giving vent to the short, sharp barks of dog-happiness.

The watchman got up and looked about him—

" I seem to have had a nap," he said in a new tone. " Very singular ! "

He patted Skipper's head, glancing up and down the deck. He saw the bell, its brass tarnished by dew, and crossed briskly to the rail overlooking the deck. He leaned forward and cried out : " Mr. Harold ! "

No one made answer. The sheds took up the cry, repeating it. He stepped back and tapped three times on the deck where a deck light showed a white line amidst the planks. " Forward there ! " he cried out. " Lay aft the watch."

Still no answer came to him, no sound of any

sort but the echo of his own voice and the thin ripple of water on the ship's side. He descended the poop ladder, determined to solve these enigmas. There was a wonderful clarity in the air. Old Gargoyle felt it. He was a new man on this new day which was born. He came to the door by which men approach the cabins from the main deck, and twisted the handle. It was locked. A fresh enigma appeared with every move he made. The half-deck door was shut and locked. The carpenter, sailmaker, bo'sun either slept or were dead, the key turned upon them. The sailroom he could not enter. Incomprehensible! He moved with growing impatience, Skipper slinking at his heels. He came to the forecastle doors and hammered on the iron. They were secured, silent, the crew vanished.

What in the world had happened to the ship? Where were all hands? Where the mates, boys and men? He climbed the spar which lay beside the rail amidships and looked overside. Lap, lap, lap—the water rilled in tiny ripples upon iron—lap, lap, lap. Nothing more. Dead calm! Not enough wind to raise a clang. No sail set either! He stared aloft in the growing light and saw yards twisted to avoid contact with the sheds, yards braced as no seaman would brace them; rigging screened in places, running-gear fastened up, cargo pennants aloft, stages by the main hatch.

The watchman took off his cap and rubbed his head—

"We seem to have got into port somehow since I went to sleep," said he. "Mighty singular!"

He made quite sure that this was so, climbed the poop and found all doors shut and locked, the ropes flaked up, no one at the wheel, and came back to the main deck without scraping, with no jerk of the hand, no drag—the fact that for months he had dragged and twitched forgotten.

He wondered how it had all happened, wondered why he wore that cap, where he could find a drink of water and came, by chance, to the galley. That was open; but the fire was out. A pot of tea stood on the stove. It was tepid, stewed—but he drank of it. He was terribly thirsty.

He sat down on the locker fronting the dead fire and his hand touched a little bundle of food. There was a note beside it which said on a printed form: "You are appointed night-watchman to the *Mandarin* which comes alongside early to-morrow. Report yourself early in the day."

This was addressed to William Gargoyle.

. . . .

The night-watchman decided that he was amazingly thirsty. He reached for the tin can which held tea and drank again—

"It's a facer," he announced, his hand on the dog's head. "A regular facer."

Skipper thumped out acquiescence on the galley tiles.

## II

These things happened on Friday night, a few hours after the *Mandarin* had entered the Great Float, and on Saturday, which is a short day at the docks, the watchman came back to his post at noon. There were many questions to solve, a great deal to elucidate before he could face the boys.

He had spent the morning thinking, but had failed to reach any definition. The only fact that stood clearly in his mind was that when he was taken queer, he phrased it so in his dim way, it was blowing a gale of wind—a living gale by the powers, with greybeards to match—and the ship was scudding under three topsails and foresail. The sea was so heavy that he dared not try to heave to . . . she was sluggish, too ; she could not get away from it. He decided, he remembered, that they must run on or run under. The chief acquiesced . . . and after that something happened . . . something about which, as yet, his mind was blank.

He sat lost in thought over this, now that he was alone and the ship quiet. He sat on the spar in a bit of sunshine which filtered through the clouds to warm him. The breeze hummed high

aloft, giving out the note which speaks of growing force. It was going to blow. The watchman knew that. Skipper, nosing the air as he moved restlessly to and fro, knew it also. Over there beneath the tips a vessel with a long blue funnel was filling her bunkers. From time to time a crash sounded, then a black cloud rose about her and drifted across the dock. It left patches of heavy dust upon the water, crossed over and smudged the *Mandarin's* new paint. That made the old man angry, in his quiet fashion.

At three o'clock four boys arrived on the wharf alongside and climbed on board. They marched up with an air, halted, half-turned and came to the salute very creditably. "Good a'ternoon, sir," they said in unison; then one who was spokesman added: "Please, will you be able to talk to-day?"

"To talk?"

"Yes, sir—like you always do on Sundays an' sometimes on Sat'days, too. . . ."

The dog sneezed his pleasure on seeing them.

The watchman, in the midst of unsolved puzzles, was faced with a new one. A twinkle appeared. There were so many queer things going on, why not welcome them by talking to the boys? It seemed easy. They were ragged little chaps, barefooted in the Liverpool fashion, not very clean, produced by men and women who had straightway forgotten them and turned to the production of others.

Old Gargoyle noted their scarred feet and legs.

"Um!" he mused. "Talk, eh? Well, what shall we talk about?"

"Tell us about that river where the monkeys sit in the trees an' wait fer ships to come by . . . an' we'n you get there they come on board an' frow nuts at you," said a breathless chorus.

"Did I tell you *that?*" asked the watchman, his eyes bright.

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! then I was romancing . . ."

"Wot's that?"

"Pitching a twister, my sons."

"But you said——"

"Yes, I know . . . er . . . the fact is I have a bit of a cold to-day," the watchman drew himself slowly up. He saw disappointment depicted on those eager young faces. He saw that suddenly all the sunshine had gone out of them and decided that he must think before he could talk. He must make more sure of his ground. Things were vague . . . vague. He rose and the boys clustered about him. "Ever been inside a ship's cabin?" he asked at random.

"No, sir."

"Would you like to?"

"Just about!" they gave back, almost in a shout. Skipper added boisterously his word.

"Come along then. I will show you." Old Gargoyle jingled the keys in his hand, walking, the centre of an excited group, towards the saloon

entrance. And as they went he noticed the boys nudging each other, whispering. He halted on the grating outside the door and said : " What's wrong, eh ? "

" Nothin', sir," said one who grinned.

" Please, sir, you're walkin' diff'rent," another vouchsafed.

" Oh ! how do you mean ? " the watchman fastened on that at once. " How used I to walk, eh ? "

The boys hung back, afraid of spoiling the treat they had in store, afraid of angering " the gentleman," as they called him, now that he seemed so " diff'rent."

" Come," the watchman ordered, a note of command in evidence. " How used I to walk ? Tell me at once."

The boldest of the quartette recognising it, scraped down the deck, dragging one foot, lifting one shoulder and shaking one hand in sturdy mimicry.

" Like that, sir," he said, while his friends looked scared and prepared to escape.

" Hum ! . . . Lame, eh ? "

" Just about."

" Where do I live ? " asked the watchman, refusing all acknowledgment of their alarm.

" 'Unneycombe Lane, sir—number fifty-nine . . . away over there acrost the other side," said he who had explained by mimicry.

" Ah ! " the watchman smiled. " I often

wondered whether you knew that as well as where to find me at the docks."

They did not understand that he sought information and had stored it ; but answered at once with a grin which was more convincing than speech.

" And do you happen to know what they call me over there ? " he questioned again.

" Old Gar . . . " one commenced and instantly held his breath.

" Go on."

" Mr. Maginis," said another.

" You ! " the watchman ordered. " Finish it —old . . . ? "

" Gargoyle, sir," the lad whimpered, " an' please it ain't us as says it . . . fer you've bin that good ter us. . . . "

" It ain't Mister at all, sir," a fresh voice declaimed. " It's Capting Maginis. . . . Old Gargoyle is wot the alley boys call yer—not us."

" Ah ! And you are Honeycombe Lane lads, I suppose ? " he commented in tones which permitted no familiarity. He opened the door and marched the group, awe-struck, into the saloon. He scarcely saw the boys. Something ailed him. His knees shook under him. He could not understand it. He turned about and suddenly brought them back on deck. He seemed so stern that the boys were more afraid than before, yet he said when he reached the gangway :

" Run away ashore now. I'm not up to much

to-day. Come down to-morrow afternoon and . . . and I will see if I can tell you something fresh."

Then again he went over to the spar where the boys had found him and sat down, wondering what he must do. Skipper crouched beside him, his nose on his paws. He looked very wise.

The day waned. Coppery wisps flecked the darkening sky. Wind moaned and across there in the murk the steamer with the long blue funnel continued to swallow coal, to fling broadcast the dust which lay thick, in greasy-looking patches, upon the surface of the Great Float.

Old Gargoyle sat staring into the west, Skipper solemn at his feet. The cabin had produced an effect on these two which each understood in his own way. The man required to know more ; but the dog was content to lie still.

When the sky showed only a dim red smudge in the west, Old Gargoyle lighted his lamps, placed them, and taking one in hand, advanced once more to the cabin entrance. He unlocked the door, Skipper wagging at his side. Together they passed the officers' cabins and came to the inner door. The watchman turned the key, lighted the lamp which swung beneath the skylight and stared about him. The room was perhaps twenty-five feet long and twelve feet wide. There was a table down the centre with four swivel chairs at each side and one at the head—the captain's. In the forward bulkhead a stove was set and beside

it a low, cane-seated chair, wide and comfortably cushioned.

Skipper crossed at once and, standing beside it, appealed for permission to sit in it ; but his master called him to heel, passed up the side which led to another door, opened it and looked in. The dog moved back, whining.

" Heel ! " said his master ; then he entered the room and Skipper lay down with his nose on outstretched paws. He gave vent to small, whining barks ; he flourished one paw—but Old Gargoyle no longer heeded him.

He stood within a semi-circular room in the centre of which was the rudder trunk, whence little jerks and whisperings emerged—ghosts of the sounds which echoed there when the ship was at sea. He seemed to pay no attention to these signals, but leaned forward, staring at the central section of a crimson velvet couch or settee, which ran right round the cabin beneath the transom lockers. There were ferns standing on the lockers and several photographs of ships and people, some in silver frames. Beside him was a piano, over there chairs, tables, all set out and garnished with antimacassars for harbour service . . . but none of these things held the watchman who had entered. He stood transfixed, indeed, cold beads of perspiration on his forehead, his hands clammy. He seemed unable to move—either to go forward or to retire. His lips were dry. He could not speak . . . from the door-

way came the whine of a dog scraping with one paw on the carpet.

A woman reclined in that central red space, her hands folded in her lap, her head cushioned on pillows. She seemed to sleep. Her eyes were closed. Her breath came softly, and near at hand was the rudder trunk, giving out its message from the sea, from the past—small, whispering touches recording the movement of water down there in the dark.

And as Old Gargoyle stood watching her, the woman stirred and opened her eyes, which instantly responded to the light which was in the man's ; which spoke to him in spite of his silence, called him. Her arms lifted in appeal and with a swift ecstasy he moved nearer, whispering her name : " Mary ! "

He reached the settee, blinded, in a flash. His hands reached out, touching nothing, meeting the velvet covering, gripping the pillows which were there . . . all else had disappeared. Only the sobbing message of a rudder stirring on its gimbals remained.

The dog whined more loudly. He scraped upon the carpet as his master kneeled there beside the couch.

. . . .

Old Gargoyle returned to the galley that night on the arm of a dock policeman, who boarded the ship to discover why rules which forbade lights

after certain hours had been broken. He considered his position when alone. He went his rounds with Skipper disconsolate at his heels. He was puzzled, vague in speech and troubled greatly by the fact that those boys had convicted him of romancing. He remembered that. All other happenings remained obscure.

Sunday broke grey. The wind came soughing over Bidston Hill, carrying mist and rain. It shut out the old mill, the pines and all those placid habitations that have climbed encroachingly about its base. Until ten o'clock the rain worked hard to lick clean the docks, the ships, even the coal-tips ; then it ceased. Some of the scum remained, but it was huddled in a corner, far down by the gates where the wind pushed it and kept it turbulent. The *Mandarin* was clean. She had but recently come in from the sea and Old Gargoyle had been busy with a broom. Now, as the sun came out and the churches of Wirral began their carillons, he found a squeegee and set to work to dry the decks.

Work was essential, he told himself. Work might aid him. There was so much he could not understand . . . and presently the boys would be down. He wondered, as he used the long rubber implement known as a squeegee, how many there would be. The knowledge that he stood convicted of romancing troubled him in spite of his occupation. He wondered at his audacity in telling that story. He wondered

whether his employers knew that he held this class ; whether the dock policeman knew it, whether the watchmen on other ships had seen what was going on ; and, as he wondered he pushed the water methodically towards scuppers which gurgled. The wonderment caused no alarm.

A man who has lost a whole slice of his life and has to a certain extent discovered his loss, is freed of minor influences. He has learned the true meaning of tragedy.

At three o'clock it was blowing a gale from the nor'-west, a typical Liverpool gale which had its moments of sunshine, its gusty squalls, its menacing dun clouds which might sweep up the Dee Channel and leave the city dry, or break upon it with hail and sleet from the outer seas. Old Gargoyle scarcely expected his class ; but the boys came in threes and fours until there were twenty present ; then, at half-past three, one who seemed to act as petty officer drew them in line and called the roll. Old Gargoyle had opened the door of the sailroom and now stood watching, fascinated by the process of discovery.

This was the result of his training. During how many months or years had it gone on ? They all seemed very spry, and had a fine instinct for alignment ; kept their heads up and their hands down. And now, by all the powers, they were after forming fours ! Turning, too, and coming at the double for the poop.

Old Gargoyle quaked. They were close to

him now and he would be expected to continue the drill ; the thing he had taught them, and of which he could recollect nothing—nothing. His tremors were unnoticed. The boys had learned their lesson. One gave the word : " Mark time ! " then, " 'Alt ! . . . Eyes right ! Dress ! "

They dressed. Old Gargoyle blinked upon them from his place beside the door of the sail-room.

The boy who had given orders approached him, saluted and said : " Hall present, sir ! " and stood waiting.

Old Gargoyle surmised from this that he was expected to inspect the line and stepped out to do so. Evidently this was correct. The boy saluted and followed him. They marched down the column. Nineteen lads from slumland, with faces which shone and garments which let in the daylight ; feet clean, legs showing high-water marks. They stood stiffly while he passed, without a smile or any hint of horseplay ; seriously interested, enthralled in what perhaps was the first drill that had mastered them. And when the old man reached the end he turned to the boy at his side and said : " Very good. Dismiss."

The boy looked his sorrow. " Won't we put 'em froo their paces, sir, to-d'y ? " he asked.

Old Gargoyle prevaricated. " Suppose we leave it to the men, eh ? "

" Oh ! they'll vote fer yer story, sir," the boy

objected, because on this day for the first time he was P.O. in charge.

"Good," said the watchman. "I am inclined to be lenient to-day. We will have the story, and, for a great treat, we will have it in here."

He pointed to the sailroom and entered it, stepping over the high wash-board with an ease that made the class stare. The petty officer noted this also, but he did not allow it to interfere with his direction of events.

"Right turn!" he said in his shrill treble. Then: "Main-top-men! by the left, double!" Fore-top-men, mizzen-top-men, main-deck hands and fo'c'sle hands followed, all with wonderful precision.

They had perhaps twenty paces to go, but they did it in a fashion that made Old Gargoyle squirm in his shoes. His teaching! His incentive during that slice of time which in some way was missing. He smiled in spite of the gravity of the moment. These boys all had their stations—stations, he remembered, which no longer exist. That was part of the tragedy he faced, a new part of which, ten minutes ago, he had been unconscious. Difficult.

He drew himself up. The boys had all entered and were sitting in various attitudes upon the rolled-up sails. Outside a dun cloud rose, darkening the Wirral, blotting out that thin edge of shallow sea down there beyond Liskard, which could be seen from the hill. He drew himself

together, too. It seemed that he had promised to fascinate those young eyes, to hold them as in the days when he had romanced. But how was that possible now ?

Oh well, a beginning was essential, so he said : " What shall we talk about ? " and halted.

Instantly a chorus admonished him of the necessary trend. " About ships, if you please, sir . . . an' may there be bananas an' Indians an' cata*ra*mans in it ? "

" Cata*ma*rans," he smiled over them. " No, not to-day." He did not know why he objected, yet went on : " We have to think of cold weather sometimes, or else, you see, you will not know what to do when it comes your way. Catamarans aren't much use off the Horn, for instance, and we shall have to consider what is. Do you know where Cape Horn is ? "

" No, sir," said a chorus of voices.

" It is down at the foot of South America, at the foot of the world. It is a place where it is cold, where it is always snowing or raining, or hailing, and nearly always is blowing. That isn't a pleasant sort of place, is it ? But ships have to go down there and fight their way round it ; they have to learn how to conquer the seas and gales which are always to be found there. Your ship must be of the very best ; and every one on board must be very keen to do his duty. But," he halted, " I expect you remember all that, don't you ? "

" Yes, sir."

" What is duty ? " he questioned to test them, uncertain whether he had ever explained it.

" Doin' fings 'cause you've got to," said one.

" Obeyin' orders you've signed on to obey," another corrected.

" Right," said the watchman. " That's better. Because you have undertaken to obey them. Duty ! lads ! that is the most serious business in life. We all have to do it. Sometimes it is very unpleasant. Sometimes it touches our pockets, empties them. Sometimes it takes our life—but there must be no whimpering. Every one has a duty to perform. Even the King, God bless him, has his duty . . . and the greater you are, the higher, the more authority you have, the more difficult it is to do your duty. But you do it because in honour you are unable to refuse. What would you call a man who was ordered to drive a lorry down town and deliver some cases at a warehouse if he gave up because the streets were crowded ? "

" No class," said a small voice.

The night-watchman waited for amending phrases, but the boys were of one opinion. That was evident from their swift glances of contempt.

" I think," said Old Gargoyle, " I managed to get that pretty well grounded."

He looked down the line in pride. For the first time since they came in the boys saw his eyes flash. They did not understand why. They saw him leaning forward, eager, a new ease in his

manner, unhampered by a hand which hung powerless beside him ; without, be it said, that strange scrape of the foot, lift of the shoulder and facial twitch to which they had become accustomed—yet they remained without astonishment. He had been cured, that was all. Some cove had given him a bottle of stuff. It was a bit of allright . . . but they awaited his story.

It came upon the heel of the word duty ! uttered with a rasp that made them start. " I have seen men go into the flames for duty. I have seen them sink in the sea. I have seen them wiped out by men whose duty it was to shoot them down, and although I know all about it, I don't seem to have done my duty by you. . . .

" You don't understand that ? "

They shook wondering heads.

" What have I taught you beside duty ? "

" About the sea, sir, and hot, hot days, an' monkeys an' Indians in cataramans, an' islands wiv palms an' cocoa-nuts. . ."

A squall broke over the river and hail-stones danced upon the deck outside. Wind moaned high up in the rigging. The surface of the Great Float was pitted with flicking circlets.

" But it isn't all calm and beautiful at sea," said the watchman, the wind note pressing him. " Hear it now. Imagine you are up aloft, stowing canvas. Never mind. I have told you of the tropics because . . . because I liked to think of it ; because, when I was a boy, I believed in it and

read of it and worshipped it. I thought it was the whole life, just as I believed and dreamed of the beautiful ships that were. . . . But there is another side. Not all ships are fine, not all the men you will meet on them are fine, and palms will very rarely be seen. . . .

" There is another side to the sea, my lads, and I must show it to you. I want you to understand it, so that when you go away in the ships we shall find for you, you will not be able to say that Old—Old Gargoyle," he twisted it out, " played you false . . . or, or you will be after giving me the ba'ting of my life, eh ? I'm afraid," he added quizzically, " you'll be thinking I want to spoil the taste of the bananas and monkeys we've talked about . . . but you won't funk sailorising if I tell you there is hard work at sea, and hard weather as well, eh ? "

" Not us, if you please, sir," came shrilly through the pattering hailstorm to hearten him.

He squared his shoulders, facing them—

" Then I will tell you," he said. " And it will be true. It happened.

" A friend of mine was in command of——" he halted a moment then added, " no matter. Call her a four-master, like this one, and my friend, the cap'n. Good. Now one day in May the four-master started away from Portland, Oregon, with a cargo of wheat for the people who live in Liverpool and Manchester and Wigan and Chester . . . you know these places. They are

all very near at hand, and the people who live in them are a hungry lot, who have never bothered to think where the wheat comes from. All they ask is that the bakehouses shall have it and make plenty of bread.

"You know that bread is made from flour, don't you? Good. And you know this mill alongside us here grinds up the corn and wheat from the ships and makes it into flour; but you don't know how the wheat comes here. You think that because I told you about monkeys and forests and Indians, the ships, like this one, have nothing to do but lie about in the sun and wait for the wheat to come on board. Perhaps you think the monkeys bring it . . . perhaps niggers ferry it alongside in their catamarans . . . perhaps it rains on board out of the skies just as it did years ago when the Israelites went out into the desert and picked up stuff they called manna . . . but it doesn't. It has to be carried on board, stowed and made secure. And because there are so many ships all wanting to carry it, you have to carry it cheap, and carry a lot or else it won't pay—you see that?"

He stood back after thumping the bench, staring at the boys, who looked scared. They had never seen Old Gargoyle in this mood before. It seemed that when he got the bottle of stuff that cured his arm and leg, he got something that made him angry.

"The cap'n got sail on his ship when she was

ready," he said in a softer voice, "and ran her down into the trades with very little trouble. He had a fair wind. He walked the poop up there," he indicated the deck overhead, "figuring out when he would reach home. He was as happy as—as a dog with two tails, because, you see, he had his wife with him. He was just married, up there in Portland, and he was taking her home. That was foolish. A man shouldn't take his wife with him in one of these four-master gutter-wallahs, when he is going round the Horn.

"There is ice and snow and the seas men call greybeards, off the Horn," he said, with a bite of which he was unconscious. "Greybeards are big seas which chase after a ship, and if she is deep they try to roll over her . . . try to steal her men . . . try to smash them, smash the ship; and sometimes they succeed."

He marched irascibly up and down before them a while, then stood still, pointing, grey in the semi-light. "They are very strong, those seas. They tumble along with a white crest smoking high above you, and if they overtake you they try to batter your decks in, they sweep men overboard and gut the houses. No need to be scared, mind, if your ship is a good one . . . but some of them aren't. You see," he explained, "I have been talking so much about bananas and monkeys and niggers, that it is time I gave you to understand that you will have to reckon with seas and ice and

snow and gales . . . bitter, bitter gales as well. Else I won't have done my duty by you. I know these things and you don't, therefore I must teach you all of it—not only the sweets—if," he said it in an aside which made the lads thrill, "if there are any sweets left to-day at sea, or anywhere else this side of Kingdom Come."

Again he leaned forward, speaking with a sting that kept them staring, his lips working, his eyes wonderful in their power—

"And so my friend's ship crept through the tropics. There were no islands where she was, no palms—just the sea and the sky for days and weeks on end. Stagnation. The ship doddering along, getting clogged with weed and slime and barnacles. She sailed more slowly than ever now. But she crossed the line . . . sweltering hot it was; so hot that they had to man the head pump and flood the decks with water . . . chock those scuppers you hear gurgling outside with lumps of canvas, so as to keep them cool. Calm, calm, calm," he reiterated the word till it rang like a sob. "The beginning of ill luck, little chaps; the beginning of the end. Calm and sultriness. Calm and an oily sea . . . snakes and seaweed tangled all about us. . . And that went on for weeks. . . .

"Over there," he pointed, "on the horizon, a ship hung idle against the sky. Down there a brace of them twisted round and only the mirror of the sea showed that they twisted. The sun

poured down on all four. They couldn't talk to each other, they were too far apart. They couldn't speak with flags, the flags hung like dish-clouts. And while they circled and preened themselves, weed and slime and barnacles grew thick upon them.

" The four-master's cap'n put out a boat," the watchman announced with a jerk. " He put men into her to scrub the side ; but they couldn't reach under water where the barnacles grew—thick I tell you, like fungus in a wood. A ship can't sail fast when she is deep in the water ; but she sails even worse when she is foul. Why ! before this four-master got clear of the doldrums her side was like a field ready for the scythe. So she daundered into the south-east trades and daundered into the forties. Birds came up from the south to look at her. They saw that she was very slow and deep, and they shook their heads over her and screamed off to other ships.

" Birds will not follow a ship that is going to be lost any more than rats will stay in her hold," he announced, his eyes intent on the sunlight which again streamed in at the door ; the last rays, already tinged with crimson. " They know all about the weight of seas down there, you understand, and say to themselves ' this is a fool-ship manned by fool-people who want a lesson at the hands of our lord the wind—one they will get. They crawed as they sailed away for the other ships, ' Craw . . . Crrraw ! " he croaked it out,

" a fool-ship, manned by fool-people ! Let her learn ! Let her learn !

" Then the wind came out heavy from the north with rain and blackness which changed to hail and sleet as the ship moved on. She drew near the Cape, her decks awash, her sails black and stiff as boards—frozen, you understand, and bellying with wind which should have made her scud like the *Cutty Sark*. Eigh ! but you should have seen *her* go. Dry, too, like a yacht. But this thing I'm telling you of dragged like a scow. The seas would run over her when they grew big, grew into greybeards, but this gale was from the north and hail beat them flat. Then, quite suddenly, the wind changed ; shot into the sou'-west and blew as though God Almighty was angry with that ship and had decided to whip her people. . . .

" It came up in the night with swinging snow squalls, so they called out all hands to shorten sail. You know what that is ? Right. Well, they took in sail after sail. They just snugged them in the gear and let them hang. They couldn't stow them fast enough to keep pace with the gale—for the crew was small ; small. They were up all night fighting with frozen canvas, canvas heavy with snow . . . up on the yards there overhead ; shouting, singing, swearing—oh yes ! You never heard the like. But they couldn't master the sails. They were too few, and the sails balooned high above them, trying to push

them off the yards . . . trying hard. The men hadn't the chance of a snared rabbit.

" Four o'clock came along and with it one of the greybeards of Cape Horn. It climbed the rail aft and rolled out over the bows. It set the ship swaying. The sails whanged as she sank in the wake of it. She buried her nose in its flank as it moved off. She was pointing up, climbing like the cars when they are going up Ball's Road East. Then she tilted till her yards scored the foam and three men were washed from aloft . . .

" No one saw them go. It was black as the inside of a drain. No cries were heard, for the roar of the wind and sea drowned all that. They were gone ; but the fight went on. It never stopped, because, you see, when a gale starts in down there it blows till it blows itself out. It was dark ! God ! it was dark. No sun to cheer men, only a misty grey splotch that showed up at times, like a wind-dog—cold."

The boys sat entranced.

" Force loves the dark. Chaos moves at ease in the dark," said Old Gargoyle, in the tones of one thinking aloud. " Hell broods in the dark. Violence goes hand in hand with devilry and death in the dark. It seeks to terrorise men so that it may break them. If you are unfit it breaks you. If you are unready, it jumps upon you and seeks to put you quickly out of sight. That is why it is essential to be strong, well-found, alert . . . oh ! very intensely alert."

He came back with a snap to that row of listening lads—

"When the sea rolled over the ship," he said quietly, "it broke some of the ports in the after cabin, and the water rushed in. It stove the quarter-hatch, and the water got below. Then, while the cap'n with two men were trying to cover the holes with canvas, the cap'n's wife came from her room to look for him. She was afraid. The water had gone over her and she was wet to the skin. She made the cap'n hear and he climbed up to help her. She wanted to stay with him . . . but that couldn't be, for his duty was to the ship. So he took her along, got her some dry clothes and put her in the chart-room. There is a sofa in the chart-room. . . . He told her to lie down on it and not to be afraid. Then he set his dog to mind her and went out to help mend the torn hatches. He wanted to keep her by him . . . but that was impossible. It was a very black gale.

"The cap'n had only a few men, for many of them were aloft trying to furl the fore-top-s'l. They had to do one side at a time, and they had been aloft for hours. Two men were at the wheel . . . the mate stayed with them to help keep the ship straight. She steered very badly because she was so deep and so dirty . . . and she was running in the worst gale she had seen . . . running through the blackness, just as though she was in a tunnel or a drain. Then came more snow. It blinded the men who steered, stiffened

the great sails whanging up there in the night, and made men drowsy."

The watchman stopped abruptly and stalked the deck before boys whose eyes were riveted on him ; boys with their mouths open, whose faces reflected the glow which filtered in upon them. He stood presently, frowning, his brows moving—

" You know what it is to be cold in Liverpool streets ; you understand the slurry of winter up here ; but that is all like Hop-o'-my-Thumb to the Giant in comparison with the cold down there." He pointed at the deck, but the boys understood. " Down there you get frozen. You want to sleep, and if you sleep you die. You are too numbed to hold tight, and when one of these grain ships lurches or a sea sweeps over her, you fall . . . and it isn't nice to remember what happens. It was cold like that when the cap'n was busy with those two men plugging up holes. It was black, so he couldn't see. The wind roared so he couldn't hear . . . but suddenly the ship stooped down aft and he felt what was coming. It was another of those greybeards, and it swept over the stern as the cap'n reached the poop.

" It took hold of the men at the wheel and bashed one of them against the skylight. His head went clean through the shutter. They had to pull him out . . . and it broke part of the wheel, so it was more difficult to steer than before. . . .

" It rolled right over her and went out quaking. The ship toppled over on her side. Her cap'n

thought she was going under—but she didn't. She was a game old waggon . . . game as the men who fought to keep her afloat. Aye! If only there had been a bigger crowd of them."

He broke off. Again he marched up and down the narrow space, seeing nothing, his brow puckered, trouble in his eyes.

"We got chipped that night," he gave them over one shoulder and marched again. "There was water below . . . cargo shifted . . . wheel damaged." He threw a phrase with each turn. "Saloon flooded . . . three men swept overboard . . . one killed. And there was a crowd up aloft stowing that top-s'l still!" He reiterated this like a plaint. "The cap'n shouted to them to come down . . . to let it blow away. They didn't hear.

"The sea cleared off after a while and the ship rolled on as before. But now the cap'n had to stay by the wheel, for it was heavy enough to keep four men busy. The wheel-box was gone, gratings washed away . . . compass gone. The men had to stand as they could and steer by the feel of the wind. They couldn't do anything in that black hole but keep on fighting and pray for the sun. . . . Then the dog crawled aft, whining. . . .

"The cap'n drove him away. It was pitch black. . . .

"By and by the steward came along with a pot of coffee and the men cheered him. They got

a biscuit and butter apiece and thought they were back once more in the Goree. For a while the squalls had been less fierce and the cap'n thought he might give a cup to his wife. So he said to the steward : ' Get me another cup and I will . . . I will take it in to Mrs. Maginis. . . ."

The watchman lurched as he said this, stared through the open door and went on in the tones of one repeating facts which slowly found sequence—

" So he took it in his hand and got along to where the—the chart-room was . . . but couldn't find it. That was strange. It bothered him for a minute, then he turned back feeling with his hand and foot as he went. . . . And he came to a hole in the deck. A big hole with torn edges . . . he called for a lamp. . . ."

Old Gargoyle paused again, fumbling with memory—

" The cap'n took hold of the lamp and looked ; but there was no chart-room . . . only the hole where it had stood. A broken bannister stuck up over the stairs which led below. Down at the bottom water sloshed about . . . an' it wass dark . . . dark.

" The dog stood at the edge of the hole, howling—

" So the cap'n got hold of the steward and sent him below to see . . . see if Mrs. Maginis wass in her cabin. He knew she was not in her cabin . . . but he couldn't go himself, because—because duty kept him on deck. So he just crept

away an' stood lookin' into the black night . . . an' the dog stood up beside him with his poor paws on the rail—howling . . . howling.

" An' there was nothing to see, bar the foam of our wake. Faith ! there was less. . . ."

For a moment it seemed that Old Gargoyle had ended his talk ; but something in the boys' wrapped gaze compelled him to resume. His voice was husky. There was a new thrill in it, an accentuation of the brogue which is inscriptable—

" I love the sea," he said quietly. " I would like to end my days out there where it talks to a man—not here. But I'm forced to spake what I know. You are boys—just boys like I wass once, an' I want ye to know there's good as well as bad at sea. I don't want ye to be goin' about thinkin' it's all jam an' bananas an' fishin' from the flyin'-boom end . . . so I'm afther tellin' you this, an' . . . an' I can't end it."

Old Gargoyle's head sank. He seemed abashed, but he said in the voice the boys knew best—

" When the steward came back he crept up an' touched my shoulder. Perhaps I wass so busy wid lookin' out that I didn't hear him comin' ; but I looked round then—indeed, I looked round then. An' he commenced to—to spake to me, but," very softly fell the words, " but I can't be tellin' ye what he said—because, ye see, the clock wass stopped. . . ."

The boys stared. They could not understand

Old Gargoyle now. By their silence this was conveyed to him and he lifted his shoulders stiffly to say in the queer rasp he sometimes used :

" The clock stopped." He tapped his forehead, repeating the phrase—

" You understand that ? Ha ! You are like Skipper. . . ."

He breathed quietly—

" The dog knew . . . but I . . . I . . ."

Suddenly he leaned against the bulkhead, slid to the sailmaker's bench and covered his face, uttering the one word—" Dismiss ! "

. . . .

The petty officer of the day rose to the occasion and repeated in his thin treble : " Dismiss ! "

. . . .

As the boys filed past, the dog came near his master and thrust his nose beneath his hands.

# PART II

# THE
# SANDS OF MA-TONG

## AN EPISODE?

If you saw a country-wallah or a sailing vessel trim
In the old forgotten ages when still the world was prim;
You dreamed of Chinese Go-downs and the Coolie workers' song,
As they carried down the tea chests from a place they called a Hong.

Or remembered once in June when an inky sky unrolled
League on league of bastion all lit by flushing gold;
When wind was gone and sea aglow, and birds came screaming through
The diming circle where you lurched, and men said it would blow

While still 'twas calm. No wind, no sun, no anything but blur;
Till up you climbed the sails to furl, the gear to stop and heard
It stir . . .
A giant bared for war, naked; a force the Chinese call ty-phoon,
As you crept down on tilting shrouds one evening late in June.

## I

He came over the bay in a sampan towards noon on a day so hot and airless the ships and junks lying between Hong Kong and Kow-loon were mirrored in perfect stillness from one end of it to

the other. Mount Victoria quivered in a haze beautiful as a mirage. The Praya from the Godown Co.'s Wharf to East Point, whence he came rowed by a Chinese girl and her grandfather, was white and scintillating; the sea, soundless—a looking glass staring at the blue sky even as the sky stared down upon the sea.

He came from amidst a tangle of junks and sampans, trailing a whiff of camphor wood; a joss stick burning before a small and ugly god with a banana on the threshold of its temple to ensure his safe crossing. He leaned back beneath a small awning, watching the oars splash and dip and throw little beads of water upon the placid surface, yet saw none of these things, nor felt nor smelled them. He knew them all intimately, despite his years. He knew the East as those know it who are of the Services—Navy, Army, Civil—and have had an allotted command or district to control. And now as he crossed the bay, his eyes alternately on the girl or on the old, puckered face of her grandfather with his rather wide set eyes, he appeared to accept the pair as part of the scheme of things and of his life in particular. His attitude of complete disregard seemed to say that he had nothing to learn, nothing even from the patriarch whose gaze, despite his lined face, was keen, hawk-like in intensity beneath sleepy lids, and quite inscrutable.

Nor had he noticed the circumstance of his hiring. Sampans lay in scores off and near the

steps ; yet magically he had stepped without argument or chaffering from amidst other " boys " into this machine controlled by a patriarch and his grand-daughter . . . or was it his daughter, perchance, even, his wife ? Hewitt did not ask these questions. Nor could he have answered them. The relationships existing among the water population of Chinese rivers, bays and estuaries is complex to a degree and cannot be solved by Europeans. More especially was this the case with the sampan's passenger ; a person on the face of it who stared into the distance and saw neither the monstrous straw hat, shaped like an inverted V which crowned the patriarch, nor the blue-black blouse and pantaloons of the girl who stood before him to row.

These things were as they were—commonplace ; not to be changed by criticism. He had eyes at this moment only for the ship he approached. He called her the *Yellow Jacket* in his mind because years ago some deed of hers had been registered in his memory. He might with equal relevance have called her *Peacock Feather*, because the mandarin who shadowed him decked his scull with that emblem. She was *Sirius*, the dog-star, homeward bound, when a breeze came, with tea for those who love it and know not whether it comes from China, Japan or the sea of Aral.

He rose and stood beneath the awning as they drew near, while the patriarch tilted it to give him a clear vision. They came close to the gangway

and almost immediately his lethargy disappeared. He sprang on the grating and climbed the ladder with the air of a man who is intent ; the patriarch followed him and squatting on his heels on the little platform, proceeded to " makee piecee smoke pigeon," while his grand-daughter, child or wife busied herself with a swab and a little bamboo pail at the well of the sampan.

Hewitt climbed, reached the quarter-deck and asked the midshipman on duty if Captain Marsden had come off. He had. He awaited Lieutenant Hewitt in his cabin. Would the lieutenant come aft and see him ?

And as the two moved thither the patriarch who had squatted on his haunches rose and climbed also to the quarter-deck, having given word to the girl, and became as one of those who still laboured in the ship's hold. Then the sampan pushed off and proceeded, rowed by two, over the glassy bay.

Hewitt entered the cabin to the popping of corks.

" Hallo ! Hallo ! " came a voice in greeting. " Just in time. Come in, there's a dear boy. We are having a cocktail—another glass, steward. Talbot, this is my friend, Lieutenant . . . er . . . by the way, that's right, isn't it, Hewitt ? "

" No, sir. Sub . . ."

" Ah ! My friend Mr. Hewitt ; Hewitt, Talbot, my Chief. Now we know all that is necessary and can get to business."

The business at the moment was the due consumption of Captain Marsden's special . . . a cocktail of immense virtue, and a cheroot.

Meanwhile the punkah-wallah waved a lazy air to and fro from some unseen niche in the bulkhead ; while Marsden stood with raised glass to give what white men suppose is the Chinese phrase for good luck, and the Chinese, with half shut eyes, accept as the English version of it—"Chin-chin !" *

It made no difference to the cocktail. They drank and approved in the usual way, set down their glasses and lighted cigars.

The sun, it appeared, had successfully climbed over the foreyard—how much higher it would go was a matter of less importance to those sitting in the captain's cabin waiting, one upon the other, and enjoying ritual.

Marsden was a man of medium height, square shouldered, powerful ; with blue eyes, fair moustache and beard trimmed in the naval fashion. Talbot was taller, but clean-shaven, with eyes even bluer than those of his skipper. Both were in white uniform, braided cuffs and blue cummerbunds. Hewitt, tall, dark, erect, a small, close moustache, very like down, on his lip, and wearing the white kit of the Buffs, two companies of a regiment, often known as the "Nutcrackers," who were in barracks down by the Lyee-moon Pass. They all three talked naval and

* As a matter of fact it is what is known as Canton English.

military shop easily until Talbot rose and went on deck ; then Hewitt, rolling his cheroot, asked : " Your punkah-wallah in hearing by chance, sir ? "

" Yes—but he hasn't two words of English."

" Good."

Again for some minutes there was silence in the cabin but for the creek and flop of the heavily embroidered cloth overhead.

Then Hewitt, puffing at his smoke, said : " I've got leave. Chucked out, by jove, willy-nilly . . . and they tell me you are sailing in a few days. I wonder if you can take me ? I hate steam . . ."

" Of course we can . . . er . . . but what do you mean by 'chucked out' ? " He stared across at the trim young figure, his cheroot poised. " You are not leaving the Service ? "

" No—no ; leave only."

Marsden breathed again. " Good—well luckily there's plenty of room. Some others coming, so my agent tells me this morning. Nothing definite I gather—so you can take your pick of the cabins."

" Capital."

" But how comes it you have leave already ? "

" Can't say I'm keen to go, either," Hewitt admitted, " but the doctor is explicit, and the Chief is exercising his discretionary powers, he tells me, to save my life. Lot of rot. Fact is there's nothing doing out here, no trouble brewing ;

no Mr. Yeh * these days to stir us and give us a chance of promotion. All flat, sir . . . flat as my hand . . ." He broke off suddenly, his eyes searching over Marsden's left shoulder strap, the picture of a ship ; perhaps the *Yellow Jacket*, done with meticulous care for the details of her rigging by a Chinese artist ; but not seeing it, or anything within its range. " I suppose," he said again, signally abrupt and indefinite, " I shall be able to get my kit together in time, though ? "

" We sail on Thursday at two or three o'clock, after the breeze comes in."

" Good. Can do . . . I say, can I stay and look round a bit ? . . . I could come to a decision better if I do that . . . "

" Certainly. Stay to tiffin."

" May I ? Delighted. Jove ! I angled for that pretty neatly . . . you don't mind, do you ? "

" Not from your father's son, my boy."

" That's delightful of you. I love to remember you've put it like that before ; but I love it especially now, when——"

He broke off, got up, looked out of a port and came back, his face set.

Marsden saw without appearing to see. He had keen eyes and a range of two hundred odd degrees. Under those conditions a man may read more than seems possible. Presently he said, quite casually : " May I ask a question in my turn ? "

* Chinese Mandarin, Governor of Canton Province during the war of 1857.

"You mean why have they given me leave," the boy tapped out instantly.

"Naturally."

"And don't think much of that patter of mine about Yeh?"

"Not very much, as you ask—especially as Yeh's as dead as some of his victims. Come—I've known you quite a long time, and there's that boy of my own at Woolwich, you remember, Dick. What am I to tell him if he asks?"

Hewitt came quite close, his cheeks flushed, his eyes sparkling. "Tell him, sir, from me, that if he comes out here, not to go making an ass of himself over some woman . . . Of course I mean girl . . . tell him to stick to dogs and yachts and—horses in his spare time. That trajectories won't do it but that sport will. Especially yachts and engines . . . er . . . is he to be a gunner, sir?"

"Sapper, I hope."

"Better and better. That will put him in touch with pontoons and ships and everything connected with them. He will be free, away camping out, free of the gossip we get in cantonments—especially on certain stations. Oh! It's vile. . . . Pity they didn't make a sailor of me and give me the chance of seeing more than one beastly angle of rock and sand in a year. . . . Oh! by the by," he jumped away at a tangent, his eyes glowing, "Do you happen to know anything of the singing sands down there by Ly-ee-

moon . . . they call them the Ma-tong sands. I've been there a lot of times, but only heard them once—then it . . ."

Again he broke off, seemed to hesitate, and went on almost shyly : " I'm awfully interested in things of that sort—physical geography, you know. Have you ever heard them ? "

" No—but now you speak of it I've heard of them. What do they sing ? "

" God knows. I could make nothing of that . . . it is the native crowd that hear words—Chinese I suppose—if there are words . . ." He rose and crossed the cabin, speaking abruptly. " They tell *me* weird things without words, by Jove. Suggest it in some way." He paused beside a great square port through which a vista of still, blue sea and the mountains of Kow-loon were plainly in sight ; but without stopping the description in which he was involved. . . . " Somehow you get to think they are singing, while all the time you know they aren't. They are just making that strange rumbling—that's not the word—bell-strokes, the notes of a lute—humming them out with closed lips so that you can't tell what they say . . . and you are strung up by what you have been told, the mystic air of the bonze who is in charge perhaps and you just surrender and let yourself go . . .

" So the sound rolls on, loud enough sometimes to deafen you—that's when it threatens, they say——" He turned, his eyes on the

punkah, shrinking from it as though it would strike, " and it's like nothing but thunder, thunder rolling in the distance and drawing near . . . and you see lightning when of course you *know* there is none . . . mind, I am speaking largely from hearsay, for though I only heard it once, our fellows all went out at one time or another. Sometimes just with boys to guide them, sometimes with a queer old joss-house person—a bonze of sorts . . . and, oh, with guests—girls, men, women who had been at mess . . .

" That is how I went . . . two of us together, and the bonze. I heard then for the first time ; we both heard—Faith ! sometimes it was loud enough . . . and the old man read us our riddle ; improvised, perhaps, while the thing rang on. We had strange visions . . . peeps into the deeps, flashes of what is to come . . . while in reality there was nothing before us but that stretch of sloped sand, which roared and cried and moved without hands, under our eyes——

" We couldn't mistake it." He was steady now, engrossed, under a spell. " It was broad moonlight. I could see to read a book. There was no wind, no surf, the bay was as calm as it is now . . . a most holy night ; quiet, *still*, until we crossed the sand, climbed it rather, and stood listening. . . . Then it began to roll and ring—a sort of Eastern effect, lute and tomtoms, you know—and yet there was nothing there . . . nothing, nothing ! but the desolate beach, miles

from anywhere, and our three selves . . . we two crouching so near the bonze that we could hear him whisper.

" What was it ? What power holds it ? And why the effect on one's belief ? I am not afraid of spooks and things ; but I had to hold myself from making a bolt for barracks . . . not because the old priest curdled me ; but because . . . oh well. I can't go there. It's beyond my knowledge, something pretty deep down ; beyond criticism or analysis . . ."

Marsden moved slightly in his chair, his cheroot in full blast, nodding encouragement. " Of course. Of course . . . one can't analyse the unknown."

And the boy, swiftly at his ease under the spell of this acquiescence—" Oh ! I'm glad you look at it like that. But you don't believe in things of this kind ? I don't mean that you refuse to credit your ears when you hear sounds there's no disguising ; sounds that will not always come, mind ; but come sharply enough when time and tide are in accord . . . whether the tide you know at sea, or the tide of human affairs, I cannot say . . . yet there they *are*. In your ears. Close—and there is nothing to account for it, nothing but a stretch of sloped sand . . . dazzling, clean in the moonlight.

" What causes it ? Where do they come from ? Is it natural or devilish ; a warning, or a hint which may relate to your future, which is worse ? "

his voice sank here in a way that was irresistibly pathetic, " or is it all trickery . . . some Eastern jugglery that we can't define . . . like the mangrove growing from a seed on the bare deck at Port Said, by Jove, under your eyes. Look at me, sir, . . . I'm oppressed, burdened and I don't quite know why. Is there anything behind it all, or am I an ass with nerves ? I've known you ever since I was at school and I would rather have your views and advice than listen to the men at mess. . . . Do you believe any of us can read the future . . . that's what it comes to—a sort of crystal gazing . . . do you ? "

He faced about and drew nearer as though determined to read as well as hear his friend's answer. It came, brief and to the point.

" I do not."

" Good ! Good ! That frees me, by Jove ! " He did not say of what it freed him, but waited, patient, while Marsden went on—

" I think there are people who honestly believe the future can be read—on what evidence I don't know, and there are charlatans who play upon that and make money out of it."

" Splendid ! You are giving me back my life!"

" Who was this bonze ? "

" Oh, he's pukka . . . absolutely."

" And your pal ? "

" My pal ? "

" The one who clung to your arm ? "

" White as they make 'em."

"Man or woman?" Marsden pressed.

The boy's fingers went up to his small, dark moustache—"Why—what has that to do with it?"

"Everything. . . . Naturally, if you would rather withhold an answer you will do so, but in that case," Marsden smiled up at him, "I shall draw my own conclusion."

"No, no! Forgive me. I don't want you to do that. It may give you a false impression. It was a girl."

"English—that is to say, Western?"

"No, sir. Eastern—but . . ."

"That means Chinese, I take it?" Marsden asked.

"Yes."

"And you are in love with her?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything of Chinese customs in a matter of this sort?" Marsden questioned, his cheroot forgotten.

"No . . . I have heard stories, of course; but you wouldn't believe them, one couldn't if you knew her, or her father . . ."

Marsden rose and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, speaking with less than his usual freedom—"I'm sorry," he said. "That puts rather a different complexion on it. . . . No—I am not sure; but I understand your message to Dick—it is all plain . . . I should like to think it out. You see, I have heard some talk at the club and the

two stories don't seem quite to hang together . . . er . . . I should like to think it out. Suppose we go on deck and have a walk ? "

" Anything I can explain ? " Hewitt pressed, " I shall be delighted . . .

" No—no. It's plain . . . only wants co-ordination. Come ? "

They did not go, however. The boy seemed restless, oppressed, as he had termed it, and they moved about the cabin, stopping sometimes to look out of the ports, sometimes pacing slowly beneath the waving punkah.

Marsden could have said more, for he had recently come back from the club where all things are known and discussed ; but he refrained after a glance at the boy's eyes. He was fond of him and had known his father, Major Hewitt, years before he was snuffed out in a wreck on the *James and Mary* on his way down the Hoogli when returning home. That had brought the two together, and on Mrs. Hewitt's death, which occurred about a year later, Marsden had continued to act as the boy's trustee.

Naturally he had heard of the singing sands during his wanderings, not those of Ma-tong ; but of Persia and the Sinai Peninsula, both of which are celebrated in their way, quite as widely as the vocal Memnon brooding amidst the desert beyond Thebes and the Tombs of the Kings. But he gave no hint. He had caught during this talk more than once a look in the boy's eyes that

worried him. It was not fear, nor was there any suggestion of nervous strain ; yet there was something there, something that puzzled Marsden, which seemed to show the boy waited for some one who never came, pleaded perhaps . . . some one he loved? Ah! could that be—this Chinese girl, for instance? He half turned to search him and found him intent on a gleam which entered at the ports.

What in the world were they sending him home for? . . . There had been chatter of a girl at the club, you understand . . . well, but were they going to break him on this count? Fascination for some slip of a Chinese girl, that was how he put it, who, if taken into a yamun, would probably end her days at the flogging post. Scarcely a hanging matter, surely, seeing how women usually fared in China. Piecing together the boy's story and the talk of the club, he found it all natural—given the boy's age and the girl's. No doubt she knew what she wanted quite as well as the less decorative women of the West. Things of this kind were bound to happen if you threw young folk together in the East. The mandarin should have looked after his daughter better. He wondered which of the many mandarins the talk referred to. If women were to be treated as they notoriously were in China they should be hedged in by a wall sufficiently high to preclude the activities of lovers. . . . Pathetic! Of course! These things usually are. So it flashed in Mars-

den's mind as he came with pursed lips to decision —Pathetic ! Of course that was the trouble. The boy was in love with this Chinese girl ! Lord ! how things evolve—Of course that was it !

But if the boy loved her in that way why was he running away ? He turned about as the thought came ; but did not give it words. He decided to break the spell which held them both instead—

" Why not look at the cabins while we are down here, and before the shore gang tie any of them up ? " he asked.

" Jove ! I never thought of it again," said the boy. " Let's ! "

And into the alleyways they dived, accompanied by a steward.

## II

It was dusk on sailing day before the breeze came in with sufficient strength to carry the ship through Ly-ee-moon Pass ; but Hewitt and his kit were installed hours ago, hours, be it said, before Marsden found it possible to come on board. The boy's cabin had been chosen, his bags opened and things put out in readiness for dinner. And now as that hour approached the ship was under all sail, heading away, so the Chief said, for the Philippines ; Marsden occupied with navigation and Hewitt reclining in a long deck chair, his eyes on the vanishing coast.

A whiff of sandalwood crossed him and he turned sniffing like a setter, nose in air, wondering whence it came—why.

He was in the troubled mood of one leaving all he loved out there amidst that blur of purple mountains shadowing the Pass, and the ship swaying lightly on the sea ministered to it as no other environment could. The whiff of sandalwood was part of the mood ; bred of it.

This boy, Marsden discovered, had the faculty of peopling his world with those he knew. He could make them move and talk before him ; see them raise a beckoning finger to call him back.

He could visualise despair and, without doing violence to the probable sequence of events, watch what passed without stirring from the long chair that held him. It was quite easy to do these things. He had always been able to do them. He was, in effect, a most perfect medium. But he was very miserable, and the sandalwood essence ministered to that phase.

The slow movement of the *Sirius* as she pushed away from land had the effect of adding to his psychic power. It soothed him ; the air was warm, scented, still; the sails swelling up into the starry heavens were like gossamer, which a while since had glowed with the vine-tendril tint of a dress she wore when last he saw her in the garden behind Ma-tong. The stars were so bright and friendly he forgot their history and sent entreaties to them begging them to shine and radiate so that the beautiful lips praying for a message might hear and understand.

It appeared that he was concerned to make her understand, to make it quite plain why he was leaving her. He had explained, of course. Yet his heart ached with the burden of a desolation he had never conceived. For some reason it was evident that she had not appreciated his necessity . . . it had been difficult to explain what was the difference between a Service order advising him to apply for leave, and the leave which men look for, and manœuvre to obtain. In her eyes he was going home and would not be back for a year ; in

his, unless he conformed he knew the period might be indefinitely prolonged. The leave he had obtained was the sort which, in other spheres, is known as resignation. It had been difficult to explain this without explaining too fully all it meant. And now in his uncanny way it seemed to him she suffered. That was torture. It was a new angle. He remembered that explanation now as he sat in his chair drinking in the beauties of this tropic night. Her voice seemed to reach out, pleading for mercy. It came clearly in the words she had used because of some stupid phrasing on his part. Her father ! But surely that was impossible. . . . Had not her father, because of his toleration and perfect communion, given her this too beautiful Western education and permitted her feet to go unswathed by torturing bandages merely that she might mix with his friends ? Was she not fluent in the honourable language of her lover, that beautiful soldier whom first she saw lying, as she supposed, dead near the sands of Ma-tong ? . . . Then why ! Why !

The plaint came back to him and the stars were blurred to his eyes as he sent an answer. It was essential that I went . . . believe that ! Believe and pray !

He was twenty-three, and at that moment better attuned to love than war. Moreover, he was going away from love, had given it up ; only the essence remained. It was the negation of all

joy or hope ; the futile and disastrous end of life for ever. . . . That was the burden he bore and found intolerable.

Yet, because he was a man, though very young and strung, he had no thought of ending life. Despair never touched him. He lived in spite of this thing he faced . . . lived, and could talk with her, influence her. Therefore he rose from his chair and refused any longer to persuade the stars to send messages which might tell her his anguish.

He began to pace across and across the deck, forward of the mizzen mast, trying to recall the scene back there where the " Nutcrackers " were at mess, the lofty rooms, the band . . . and so continued resolutely and admirably conquering self until a dull thud startled him and he moved across to lean over the rail which guards the break of the poop, in time to see a figure swiftly moving into the gloom.

It was dark already, only a trace of the glow remained low down in the west. Lights in some of the cabins beneath him threw rays across the deck, past ghostly skidds and boats and harness casks * which stood in shadow. He remained peering about because he was uncertain whence the sound had come. He decided that something had fallen, that it was too dark to see what, and finding all quiet, he continued his walk.

Farther aft an officer maintained his brisk pace, up and down, glancing at the compass, undis-

* Casks which hold a supply of beef and pork for consumption.

turbed. Hewitt felt the possibility of having been mistaken. Captain Marsden was below ; but out there, far off and very faint now, was the Canton river light marking the coast they had left. Hewitt, with all his faculties again straining towards the scenes he had left, clung to the weather rail, taking in details of the hills which still showed dark against the sky. Then came one of the crew doubling up the ladder, and presently a voice speaking to the officer. A final sentence escaped : " He's lying in a heap, sir, and I think he's snuffed out . . . "

Hewitt reached the ladder at a bound, and as he descended, a whistle shrilled from aft. He stumbled across a grating, entered the lobby and discovered a body lying sprawled across it. One of the crew stooping over, seemed to be trying to raise it. Hewitt got down beside him with a quick : " Let me look ! " stared into his eyes, thrust a hand inside his shirt and tilted slowly back upon his heels, saying : " But he is dead ! Good God ! You had better call the captain—what in the world has happened ? "

The man rose to go as he was requested, and encountered the watch with Marsden and one of the officers coming to see what was wrong. " Chief steward, sir," the bo'sun announced, kneeling in examination—" Dead too . . . fetching a dish by the look of it, sir." The dish in question lay smashed beside him.

" Carry him to his cabin and call the doctor,"

Marsden ordered. "Ask him to report as soon as possible."

He turned to the officer—"Muster the crew. See if you can discover any explanation. Set an armed guard at the cabin entrance, another in the hurricane house. Allow no one to pass." Then taking Hewitt's arm he drew him towards his cabin which they entered and closed.

Marsden looked so serious that Hewitt made no attempt to question him. He waited, leaning against the chronometer case and curious beyond words. Marsden was filling his pipe, standing over the jar in a ruminant fashion and very slowly ramming the tobacco home. He struck a match and became vocal at the same time: "This is what comes of putting Chinese passengers on board ship without searching their baggage," said he, and flung the match aside because it burned his fingers. He lighted a second and applied it to his pipe, looking over it at Hewitt to say: "Follow suit if you care to," got in full blast and sat down. He seemed perturbed, perhaps angry. Hewitt could not tell. He pulled a pipe from his pocket and followed suit, saying in question: "Chinese passengers?"

"Yes. There is constant trouble with them," Marsden shook his pipe. "As though ships hadn't enough to do to run the gauntlet of their damned pirates without carrying Chinks in the cabin, by George, as though they were white men . . ."

Hewitt winced ; bent over a match held by the skipper and lighted up. " Good," he said. " I rather wanted a smoke. So you think one of these folk is at the back of it ? "

" It is so possible, my boy, that if I weren't an old hand at command I would swear to it. Meanwhile we await Roper's report and swear at each other. . . . Mind ! I have something to say yet. I haven't seen you since the Lord knows when, and I've been ashore listening to folk who seem to have nothing better to do than gossip."

Hewitt gathered this referred to the miserable cause of his enforced leave ; but all he said was : " Yes, they can do that rather well," and inconsequently his mind re-formed a picture of that figure he had watched from the poop rail with its rather monstrous head.

The doctor entered just as he was about to speak of it, and Marsden's attitude scarcely seemed encouraging. He pointed to the settee, questioning brusquely : " Well, what's the verdict ? "

" Heart failure, sir—almost without doubt."

" Fiddlesticks ! "

" I can make sure, of course, by post mortem ; but all the signals point to failure," the doctor insisted, calm in spite of the criticism. " Failure from shock ; a sudden alarm of some kind would do it . . . still, if you consider it wise I can test it . . . "

" No blow, no mark—nothing of violence

anywhere ?" Marsden pressed. "Of course I don't challenge your diagnosis . . . but——" he halted, seemed about to explain, then added swiftly : "ever seen the result of sand-bagging ?"

"I haven't ; but I searched for symptoms of it."

"And there were none ?"

"Absolutely none."

"Spinal column ?"

"Intact, sir."

"Behind the ear—either side ?"

"Nothing."

Marsden sat a moment in thought, then said, evidently with some reluctance : "If that is so it disposes of my theory, and I confess I had rather built upon it . . ."

"May one ask why, sir ?" the doctor questioned.

"I can give you this, if it's any use, Roper ; but I am not able to go into details at present. The fact is I was warned before sailing that trouble might be expected from the junks of a certain mandarin who considers himself aggrieved in some way by us, and I was advised where I might meet them. Not here, nor yet," he added swiftly, "and I rely on your discretion to allow the matter to go no farther. From that I generalised somewhat as follows : I have Chinese passengers on board who joined us at the last minute. One of the methods by which attacks are made on merchantmen by Chinese pirates is to send half a dozen

or more passengers—transmogrified coolies as a rule—to attack the ship's people from within. The game is to terrorise, catch men off their guard and get rid of them—usually by sand-bagging. . . . Then, when the junk comes down to sweep up what is left, there is less risk of a protracted fight, so these junks, you know, change sides. To-day they may be engaged putting nails in pirates and fixing stink-pots round their necks with a slow match attached, and to-morrow may be doing a bit of pirating on their own account or for their mandarin, or the Emperor, or some official who has been squeezed by Pekin and must find more dollars against the next squeeze. It's all in the game . . . but if you tell me the man died of heart failure there's an end of that side of the case. I shall have to find a new steward and keep a sharp eye on what goes on. . . . That is the position as I see it, and as far as I can speak at present—does it affect your opinion, Roper ? "

" Not in the least, Captain. I specialised on heart troubles when I was qualifying, and from what I saw of the steward on the passage out and since we have been on the coast I know his was affected."

" Very well. Then perhaps you will not mind reporting to the Chief, and asking him, with my compliments, if he will arrange for the funeral at daybreak to-morrow."

At this, Hewitt, who had been greatly puzzled all this time to know how he might put his oar in,

as the saying goes, seeing the talk was strictly official, looked up and said :

" I don't know, Captain, whether I am in order or not, but I heard that man fall. He fell heavily, as though he lurched against something. . . . I was walking up and down just overhead and . . . Shall I go on, or ? . . . "

" Yes, yes ! " came crisply from Marsden. " Most important. What did you hear—any altercation ? "

" Not a sound. Only the sudden, heavy, lurching fall. I stopped by the rail to listen—I thought that perhaps someone had hurt himself, you see, and as I waited I caught sight of a figure moving quickly from the cabin entrance—— "

" Yes ; good ! Which way ? "

" Forward, sir ; on the starboard side. I lost him when he reached the main rigging . . . "

" Good. Capital. Then he belongs for'ard. And you did not follow ? "

" No. I scarcely connected the two things until a few minutes ago. . . . "

" Ah ! A pity. Well, well," he turned to the doctor. " I'm sorry, Roper ; but with this new issue I must trouble you for that post mortem."

The doctor rose at once. " Very good, sir. I will get to work immediately."

" Thank you," Marsden commented brusquely, and as the door closed he turned on Hewitt with :

" Now—what is at the back of all this ? "

The attack was so sudden, the change of tone so amazing that Hewitt had no doubt at all how he must reply.

"Indirectly, Captain, I fear you must blame me."

"Indirectly only?" Marsden cut back. "Mind, I have been up at the club. . . . What right have you to take advantage of the fact that I was your father's chief friend?"

The boy rose from his chair, mindful of the sneer, the intonation which amazed: "I thought you *were* my friend, sir," he said crisply, his pipe neglected, his young figure very erect. "It seemed from your manner that I might rely on that . . ."

"Friend! God bless my soul," came in choleric phrases from the skipper. "So I thought. But there's collusion here, if my ears and brain are still active. Collusion, when a word from you to me would have put matters straight in a second . . . and I would have said, yea or nay, whether for your father's son I would take the risk. . . . Good God! Isn't it plain? Haven't I shown I trusted you, and would go the whole length if need be to make you happy?"

He stood with his back to the fireless grate, a punkah waving to stir the heated air; obviously distressed, disappointed—annoyed. And before him Hewitt waited slowly, paling under the lash of his words.

"Collusion," he said in the pause, "has an ugly

sound, sir. It requires explanation, and with your permission we will discuss that first. Of course, there's a blunder somewhere. . . . I'm sure you don't believe I would sink so low as that when a word . . ."

"Do you mean to tell me," Marsden asked, facing him with the first real touch of anger, "that you did not arrange her passage . . . that you don't know she is here?"

"She—here?" Hewitt fumbled out, amazed beyond words.

"The Chinese girl. The lady of the Ma-tong sands you were telling me of . . ."

The boy's face slowly flushed. He only grasped the full meaning of these words by degrees. He seemed incredulous, at first very obviously annoyed, then, as the flush tinged him, his answer tumbled out. "No, I didn't . . . damned if I did . . . Is she . . . Good God, sir, you don't mean it . . . and *if she is*; where! where! where?"

There was no mistaking this. Marsden was not blind. A child could have read even as he read. He crossed and took the boy's hand.

"Afraid I hipped you," he said. "She's in the cabin immediately opposite this one . . . with her ayahs and tiring-women or whatever you call them. Better go in and make your salaams. For the rest, we must talk by and by . . ."

He led him to the cabin door, opened it, pointed out where heaven lay, and pushed him forth.

Then he began to whistle, musingly, without much rhythm, as one does under the pressure of a new idea, involving a *volteface*, which slowly percolated and got itself pinned out for examination.

And when Marsden reached this stage he relighted his pipe and went through the saloon on tiptoe as far as the companion stairs. He chuckled as he climbed them ; yet reached the deck unbroken.

## III

Across the saloon came the twang of a one-stringed lute, which should have held the boy spellbound. He was so amazed, he forgot the swaying ship and reached the door at a run. He thumped rather than knocked, and instantly it seemed the door stood wide and the essence of sandalwood streamed past.

Three girls faced him and one with hands outstretched smiled. He stepped within, captured both hands and pressed them to his lips. The two who had risen with her whose hands he kissed—smiling now till only thin, black slits appeared—kow-towed backward to a cabin which adjoined ; one carrying the lute, the other a golden censer, whence a thin trickle of smoke escaped.

The two stood, one in the white kit of the Buffs ; the other in the dress he loved, vine-tendril tinted and cut mysteriously in one piece with little rills clinging to her slim figure. He took her in his arms and kissed her face, her lips, her eyes. She held back, alluring, beautiful in her perfect ease——

" My lord is not angly that his slave has come thus to his side ? "

He drew her close, answering with a question. "Do I seem angry, White Blossom? . . . Yet I should be. Why did you come?" He searched her eyes, accepting all they gave. "Why—why did you come?" he reiterated.

"Because of a very great terror which appeared, even while you prepared to go away . . ."

"A terror, belovéd? . . . I don't understand —a terror of whom?"

"Of Chung-Fa, dear lord."

"Chung-Fa! The bonze? Why, what can he do? What authority has he over you?"

"O! Verrey great authority. He is priest in our house and of our blood. He tell me his god not allow me to marry you. He say if I refuse to marry Kang Che-lo, then I must die. He is in some ways a very young child! Need we speak more of that? I came away because I do not wish to speak more of it."

"But we must speak of it, belovéd."

"At this moment I wish to see you glad," she smiled up at him. "Did my lute make you wise of my presence?"

"I did not hear. I was on top side . . ."

Again she drew back, tapping his lips gently with her fan. "On deck," she corrected. "Your Canton-Eenglis, please, for my maids."

He hid his face. She drew nearer. Cheek to cheek they stood, a soft crooning song on her lips, swaying to the rhythm, to the movement of the ship——

" O ! my dear love, who go away, sorrowing for the garden where the flushed peonies droop and fade ; picturing the noontide heat, the ebony couch that held him when he awoke from death and found me there . . . beyond Ma-tong . . .

" Whose eyes wandering, rested on lilies standing in the blue urn of Ni-hing before they touched my cheek and made it flame ; found a vase set with apple blossoms, white, like the moon ; pink, like my lips ; my lute, my maids, the bowl one held, the necklace of jade I wear while I, thy head in my lap, bent down and prayed thy glance might find even me . . . out there, beyond Ma-tong . . .

" Who loved you then before your eyes unveiled, who knew your race and had learned your tongue against the day when I, sighing as I went, weary of cups of jade, the peacock blue, the manikins who fish, and old fat Wien-Chi, who guarded always my way till I found thee, thrown by my garden wall . . . out there, beyond Ma-tong . . .

" Who had learned of Chung-Fa, the wise Priest of Buddha the All-Wise, how to speak so that my lord might understand ; how to sing so that my lord's ears should carry the sound of my voice when I was gone ; how to use my fan so that he might woo—and now, alas ! Alas ! he goes from my side, having won my love, and leaves me . . . out there, beyond Ma-tong . . .

" Ma-tong, I love not, but for the love it gave

of you. . . . Ma-tong, when you are no longer near, is lone, singing strange songs ; weird notes which come from beyond, which make me sad. . . . Of the bonze I am afraid. I who loved Ma-tong only because it brought me you. . . . Oh ! my lord, why must you go ! . . . Why must I live alone who live for thee ? . . . I die if you must go. And so I came hither to find if I may not still be thy wife . . . thy slave while beauty stirs and is mine . . ."

She leaned upon him, her hands on his shoulders, her eyes beautiful, moist with tears ; the coral of her lips parted in the strange rhythm she found for words, spoken only as the East can speak them and remain unsullied. . . . He, silent, burdened, listening in the quiet of a cabin which held no other sound.

" You are my soul," he whispered. " I dare not say how close and dear now that we have decided that we must part . . ."

She lifted her eyes to his. " You do not wish to part. I do not wish. . . . You see, you do not go alone ! " she smiled, shivering at his touch. " The ship takes us two . . . whither I know not."

" Yes—now. For the moment, we are together—but soon comes the parting if I am to obey."

" Yet, meanwhile we are one ? "

" Always we are one," he corrected.

" But not together ? "

" Even then in heart and soul I love White Blossom—always, for all time ! "

" Then I am happy, but why, if you so love me is it necessaire to part ? "

" I am a soldier, belovéd, and must obey."

" Is it a law that you may not wed with Blossom ? "

" Yes."

" Who made that law ? "

" Those who rule. I may not marry you and remain a soldier."

" Do you so wish to be soldier ? "

" It is my heart's blood."

She sighed, twisted her scarf about his arm and said : " Is that so strange law Eenglis law ? "

" Military law."

" For all Eastern people—even for me who am of the Princes' blood, kin to the Emperor . . . even for me ? "

" It stands, my soul ! I may not break it and remain the servant of my King."

" Where lives that King ? "

" In England, Blossom, my England whither we now go."

She climbed on the cushions at her feet and kissed his lips—

" I shall go see thy King when England has discovered its presence through the mists with which they say it is hid. Meanwhile we live and love and are again as at Ma-tong. Sit."

She tapped with her fan the settee on which he

had found her, and when he obeyed she kneeled beside him. "Was it Ma-tong that drove you from me . . . the story Chung-Fa found on the lips of the song and gave us there in the dusk?"

He drew her close and held her. "No, White Flower I love, it passed me by. It was the order of my Chief."

"But it was terrible. It frighted me who heard. I could not sleep lest while I sleep he came to take me to Kang Che-lo . . . or perhaps for himself. O! I have seen since I was three years old and am betrothed, Chung-Fa watch over me, teach me, speak sometimes of Kang Che-lo as of an enemy . . . and it is true that Kang Che-lo comes now with my father from Pekin. So! I am of age to be his wife for more than five years. Since I was eight he might take me . . . and he is old—old!"

"Eight!" the boy recoiled. "They do not wed you then?"

"Since ancient days it was so . . . and I am thirteen; perhaps fifteen—who knows if thou dost not who had my book of years so long ago."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Not so, dear lord! No but can be with me and thee. When I speak lies to you my lips will seal. Of my own power that will happen which will happen. How otherwise could I be thy Blossom and meet thy eyes with mine? True—true, every word. The yamun of Kang Che-lo has seen many brides and some who were, are not.

And some, maybe, are there who will not die, and so await the post where the whip may help them die . . .

" If you my soldier lord refuse thy bride, and death, so difficult to meet when we are like thy Blossom, comes not to my aid ; cruel death awaits the day when Kang Che-lo no longer loves. . . . I, who have learned thy tongue, thy ways ; have won thy love and am thine, all thine in heart and soul—O ! my belovéd, whom I love . . . without whom I pray for death, burn incense before my gods, buy crackers for the holy place . . . but continue to live—to live ; when death is the only life for which I beg . . .

" Remember, too, oh my dear lord, the punishment which fell from the lips of the bonze for those of us who love the kwei-tsze* whom he hates more greedily every moon. The hideous death of old Chinese law . . . you remember he said it when the sands rolled in our ears. You would not send poor Blossom to her death ? You would kill her first . . . one swift, sharp thrust—so . . . swear it ! "

" Aye ! By the living God if it came to that . . . but it will not—Hist ! Did you hear steps ? " he rose swiftly and opened the door—

" Nothing ! God ! I seem to hear that bonze even here."

" That, too, were possible if he believed that I come out to escape from him and be with you."

* The Devil's children, and all foreigners.

" But how could he discover it ? Surely it is not possible unless you left some sort of clue . . ."

" All things are possible," she told him, " to the priest of the All Wise who is in the secrets of the Tong of the Yellow Robe."

" Tong ? Yes, I have heard of them. But what is this one ? "

" A verrey secret force which aids especially the mandarins, and which even the priest who would be powerful must join."

" A secret society ! So I guessed. Well—that makes it complex . . .

" Complex means perhaps something I do not understand . . ." she begged.

" In this case ' many-sided,' difficult to fight because you do not know who or where are your enemies," he told her.

She nodded over this. " So ! So ! I think that is always true when we speak of Chung-Fa ! I cannot tell what I sometimes think of Chung-Fa," she said with a little twist at the difficulty of explanation. " At the beginning, when I was verrey much a child, he was kind always and verrey patient ; but when I became old, a year, perhaps two years ago, he became—I do not know how to say it ; not less kind, but more imperative that I do always what he say, think always just that all he believed was right. He wished to be master, perhaps ; to—influence, you call it that ?—all I do—and I am less sure every day that he is right, because . . ."

"Wait! Let me think, White child of the Dawn . . . Did your father know this?"

"I think no one knew, only Chung-Fa."

"And where was he when you escaped?"

"At Sai-wan. You know the temple far up the steep which looks on Ly-ee-moon?"

"And he was there?"

"Always he is there. Always for prayer and alms; for meditation and his pipe when he is not at my house at Ma-tong."

"What are these sands to him? Do they belong to the joss-house, so that he may win bread from those who go there?"

"I think he win gold, certainly; for even so the bonze must live and find for the god of his temple a share."

She rested between his knees, her elbows on them. With her fingers twisting the buttons of his tunic she looked up, catching his glance, his kisses; capturing his hand and with her cheek upon it rubbing like a kitten. Then came a sound and she turned to listen.

From the farther bulkhead it thrummed, the twang of a lute with an accompanying roll of drums, and just audible above it a voice crooning the strange intervals of an Eastern singer. White Blossom sat still. She seemed to shrink. The boy, more intent on her beauty than on the lutist, said: "Your maids warning you of the dinner hour?" and drew her close.

"No, no! That not my maids . . . it is a

drum we use in song. It comes from there . . . from beyond."

"There are other passengers there," he told her. "Chinese merchants going to London."

"Merchants?" She looked him in the eyes, her own flickering. "I did not know that Chinese merchants can spare the time for sailing ship. How did they come?"

"As you came. As I . . . as all who are here, by boat, sampan, launch."

Hewitt was erect now, twisted, as the drums rolled and the voice broke through, twisted to listen.

"My lord is angly!" she faltered, glancing sidelong.

"Angry—not I."

"Then why that frown?" She touched his brow.

He did not answer her. "That!" he lifted his finger, "is the song we heard at Ma-tong! Curious!" He sat listening, intent. "I can't understand why it is here. Who are these merchants? Ah! that gives the key to it. Chinese merchants, you say, cannot spare the time to go in a sailing ship. True. They go by steamer."

She nodded many times. "Always . . . always!" on her lips.

"And sometimes the captain tells me Chinese passengers come on board to help pirates steal the ship. Just now, before I came here, one of the crew, a steward, was found dead by the cabin

door. No one knows why he died. . . . Blossom, little White Blossom, I fear the arm of that bonze." He broke off, and as swiftly added, "from Sai-wan the bonze could see us pass, yet he made no sign?"

"None."

"Yet he is charged with your safety?"

"And to wed me to Kang Che-lo," she nodded gravely with the name, "a fat man. Yellow. Old . . . more old than my father. More old than the bonze, who, also, I now fear."

Again she seemed to lay emphasis on the bonze, and he asked her: "Why? What has he done?"

"It is less what he do than the orders he give to those who should obey me only . . ."

"Yes—but why has he this power? It is not your father's will. His sympathy is for you. He is kind to me—how then can this priest interfere?"

"Because he is of my father's house; old, learned in the law and my father bows to his will. His gods perhaps ordain it. I do not know more—only that the priest is law."

"Horrible!"

She looked up swiftly: "But I am here!"

"And I——" He drew her close and she laughed in his face, her hands clasped round his arm. "Together, always, till death if that should come."

"Wait! Listen!" He soothed her brow,

put lips to the flower above her ear. "The vengeance of the bonze follows us, White Blossom, he comes to tear us apart . . ."

"Now! Now! Have you seen?" she clung in terror, her glance on the door.

"No—I have not seen. We have talked, the captain and I, and I feel there is danger . . ."

"Feel—how do you feel if you not see?"

"I can," he asserted. "Look . . . if—if I wed you and he comes, he could not wed you to Kang Che-lo?"

"No. Kang Che-lo might kill—but he not wed." She was very sure of this. Her eyes were serious, unafraid, but watchful of her lover's.

"Will you marry me now, White Blossom?"

"How can that be? There is no church at sea," she phrased it so, the colour leaping.

"There is. . . It can be done. Marry me now for protection, belovéd, and afterwards, in England, we can marry again."

"In church?"

"In your church and in mine . . ."

"But you are soldier, my dear lord," she whispered, her eyes on his. "You may not break the law."

"I can cease to be a soldier. Forget I ever . . ."

"But to be a soldier is your heart's blood—you said it only a little while ago."

"Then I withdraw it. I did not mean you to take it so. I give it up because they seek to come

between us. I love you. We are together here for perhaps four months . . . we must be married or . . . Sweetheart, it is difficult to explain . . . but, you see, people talk—even in England. . . . Don't you see that it would be difficult . . ."

" Is that why you give up what you say is your heart's blood, belovéd . . . to save White Blossom who cannot save herself ? "

" No—no ! I marry you because I love you . . . because you are White Blossom, the Apple Blossom I saw when I woke that day with my head on your lap at Ma-tong, you remember ? And I love you . . . I love you—and nothing else matters between us two."

She clung in his embrace, surrender in every line ; trembling, perhaps a little frightened at the vehemence with which he threw soldiering to the winds ; perhaps at the novelty of this new scene with its shipboard noises and the peril she encountered at the hands of the bonze. She clung there sobbing but not from fear, and when he had calmed her, she looked in his eyes and said :

" Yes, yes, I marry you. I love you so I die if I not marry you. . . . I love you so that I wish to marry you now . . . quickly . . . to-night . . . before those come who may come to tear me away. Now, now, O my belovéd, while yet Chung-Fa is unable to interfere. . . . I love you now, to you I give my love . . . so that if death

come at the hand of Chung-Fa—I laugh, having been yours . . ."

. . . .

The drums beyond the bulkhead rolled to a cadenza given by the voice—wild as the wind note ringing across Ma-tong when the sands made music and the bonze made gold.

## IV

No explanation of the tragedy had been discovered when at dinner that night a Chinese steward served. He was a man of middle height ; strong and lithe, with oblique eyes rather wide apart, shaven head and face and a pigtail of inordinate length dangling on his blue-black coat—a man with a jowl.

His garments had the sheen of satin, little pink buttons fastened them, and the soles of his shoes were perhaps three inches through.

Marsden explained this apparition in his jocular way as the providential end of tragedy, looking across at Hewitt for corroboration. But the boy, who recognised just where he stood in regard to tragedy, was in a brown study ; listening to the doctor's account of the dangers attendant on what he called valvular disease of the heart, and the various signs by which the expert reads his patient's case. Very interesting, no doubt ; but Hewitt was seeking information of another kind, and failing.

The advent of this Chinese steward troubled him. He was but lately come from the cabin where White Blossom, her hair decked with flowers, held court. The roll of drums, now

played on deck where the men marched in a circle, praying and burning joss sticks, came in to remind him of the Chinese gift of inscrutability. That steward was inscrutable. Crackers were banging, too, perhaps to awake their gods, or to brag of their inscrutability under Western eyes.

The Chinese passengers did not come to table that night. "The motion of the ship," they gave in pidgin English as excuse. With the ladies this certainly was untrue ; but the boy knew why White Blossom remained within, and his heart sang in unison with her resolve.

He was at that stage of headiness when the thought of other men sitting near her, watching her, perhaps attempting to appraise her and win her smiles, stirred him to anger. In some way it was repugnant, even challenging. He did not analyse this feeling. He accepted it. It was part of the burden and beautiful glory of the love in which he had steeped his soul. He was not jealous ; but he knew men and found them of varying mood, latitudinal rather than restrained in their recognition of charm and the perfect bloom of so young a girl. In his mind he would have kept her shrined for his adoration and worship alone . . . and that is the essence of love, not jealousy.

. . . .

The steward stood for a moment behind the captain's chair, his eyes on this scene which now

for some months would be his, and with a perfect comprehension of his position. He spoke English of the brand known to us as pidgin-English ; but with a more generous measure of English and less pidgin. He had intelligence and seemed less of the sycophant than are men of his class as a rule. He was able to anticipate the desires of those he served, and capacity gleamed in the inscrutable eyes ; but there analysis ended.

Hewitt, who had some experience of "boys," both in barracks and at the club, could not quite place him ; while Marsden acknowledged that he considered himself lucky to find so capable a chief steward on the death of the old. That does not often happen at sea. It generally occurs that you make shift with the services of one or the other of "the young gentlemen" from the deck-house and suffer with what patience you may.

"He calls himself Cho-Lum," said Marsden when the man had gone from the saloon, "and as far as I can judge at present, he seems more competent than the majority. What can a man like that be going home for, I wonder? We don't run that kind over there . . . no such luck. Still, if he continues to shape well I shall consider his application—made already, by Jove! —and sign him on."

"They make excellent servants," Hewitt admitted, "as a rule, I confess I take to them. The only difficulty is that you can never get behind the scene with them. They baffle you completely.

You are at their mercy, and they lie like the Shaitan."

"Very much the same with all Easterns," Marsden acknowledged, "but if I have to choose between a Jap, a Bengali and a Chinaman, I take the Chinaman every time."

"So do I," the doctor chimed, "and failing him, the Malay."

"Good—I agree."

Then as the steward returned, Marsden rose and said: "Coffee in my cabin, Cho-Lum. . . . Hewitt, I expect you; and when you are at liberty, Roper, come and join us."

They made their exit, Hewitt with a cigarette already between his lips holding the door for Marsden to enter. Then closing it firmly he turned to the skipper, asking: "Who is that man?"

"What man?"

"Cho-Lum."

"One of my passengers, until just before dinner. One of the crowd pushed in by my agents at the last minute; supposed to be merchants, I gather—why?"

"I don't know. Absolutely I don't know. But I'm—I shall shock you, I suppose—I'm afraid of him."

"Afraid?"

"Just that. Who is he, and why is he here?"

"Well—but isn't it rather obvious who he is, or was, until I made him steward?"

"If you are satisfied, sir—I need not bother. But I felt, after what you told me about pirates, it would be just as well to mention that he just gives me the most comprehensive jumps. I can't account for it. I never can—but it is there right enough."

"What is there?" Marsden asked.

"This uneasy feeling . . . a sort of antipathetic business, I suppose; natural aversion to certain types."

They sat talking over this until the doctor joined them and showed them a metaphysical reason why this is so. He said it was nature shrinking from the force which has hammered us into shape or out of shape; that some people were more readily swayed by it than others, and looked with new interest on Hewitt. "We must have a talk," he said, "not in the captain's presence though," and when the boy asked why, he said: "Oh, because he is in another boat altogether. We would end in making you a sceptic. In my opinion there's nothing in the world better for one than a definite *credo*. A man can stand alone or he cannot; he believes or he does not. . . . Of course, there will be fellows who will say 'agnosco,' and look very wise. Don't heed them. It's a phase that's passing."

. . . .

When the sun went down the wind was so light it seemed likely to fail altogether before

dinner was over ; but it still held when they came on deck to sit and chat over their cigars. It was dark, the moon not yet risen, and Hewitt praying to get Marsden alone ; yet there remained, in spite of obvious hints, the doctor and an officer. Hewitt yawned outrageously. It seemed to lighten his burden.

Marsden almost at once began to roll out ponderosities about the change of monsoons, which it appeared would soon be upon them. You could never tell how soon or how late within a month they would be ; but he fancied from the lightness of the breeze lately, they would be early. He wished them luck enough to see the old *Sirius* booming away before a good stiff north-easter to-morrow, and the monsoon come in without any preliminary flicking round the compass. He could laugh at pirates then ; or if it came to that, make them sit up if they tried any tricks. . . . In calms or light weather, among all these islands, it was another matter. He wanted to see the straits of Sunda aboard ; after that it would be plain sailing ; the Indian Ocean and hey ! for the Cape.

Again Hewitt yawned, and when presently the doctor finding that infectious, said he had something to fix up in his cabin, that he must go, and rose to do so, the officer discovered a similar necessity. Then Hewitt, smiling blandly, turned on the captain with : " Forgive me, sir. I was aching to get a talk."

Marsden, chaff thrust aside, admitted it was essential, and sat back waiting with : " How's the lady ? " on his lips.

Perhaps it was this attitude that chilled the boy. He could not have said. His pulses were leaping, his cheeks burned, but the phrase checked him. Marsden was a dear, kind old chap, but what was there to say ? There are some phases of one's life which one does not discuss even with one's father !

The beauty of this idyllic adventure with White Blossom tied his tongue. It was his. It was hers. It was sacrilege to speak of it with others, especially in that tone. Yet his promise must be carried out, and Marsden's help was necessary. He could not break his promise. It would be the last crime . . . indeed, all his energies were bent on keeping it. He had no reservations there.

Marsden, perhaps without knowing it, came to his aid by saying simply, as he watched the boy's moodiness : " Can't I help ? God knows you are welcome to anything I can give. . . . Let us get into the hurricane house and talk."

" It is the absolute tragedy of it all that holds me up," Hewitt tossed out as they moved forward. " I have to give up love, or give up my career . . . and all my instincts are to keep both. . . ."

Marsden, noting the tone, said in his quiet way, as they took seats on the settee : " I'm afraid my perspective is a bit askew. Tell me what you will, my boy . . . for instance, who is she ? "

" Daughter of the Governor of Quan Tung, sir. Top dog over all the mandarins of Canton and south of it . . . and—and she saved my life."

" Really ? I had no notion. Go on."

" Her father has what we would call a summer-house on Hong Kong Island, round there by the Pass . . . the only decent part of the Island to live in, and I saw her first when I woke after my fall. . . . I was riding down there, you remember, and got badly thrown. . . . She saw what happened from a watch-house on the walls of their yamun, and came out with her maids and took me in . . .

" For days I was in her house and dead to my regiment. She saved my life. I woke with the touch of her cool hand on my brow, and saw bending over me a girl so young and beautiful I thought the angels held me. . . . No—I have no knowledge what happened. My pony seems to have chucked me into a pool among the rocks, and I was half drowned as well as stunned . . .

" That is the whole story, sir. It began just so. Her father was in Pekin. There were the servants, a duenna-type lady who knew no English, flowers everywhere, carnations, bowls of jade—Ni-hing vases. Lord ! the colour of it all, and behind the colour lutes thrumming on sunlit verandahs . . . occasionally this bonze person who runs the joss-house under Sai-wan, and White Blossom, Apple Blossom robed in jade, helping me, tending my cut head, you see, up there," he

leaned forward, exposing with his fingers the scar amidst his dark hair, " with the skill and tenderness of a nurse. What else was before me? Idyllic! Half angel, half child, wholly in love . . . and the upshot, when my colonel heard, I am to throw her off, push her out of my life . . . unless——" his voice fell to a whisper, " unless I take her for my mistress. . . . White Blossom! The one soul in all that sickly, languishing crowd one meets on the Praya one understands and trusts. . . . Don't you see it—it's damnable?"

He flung back among the cushions on the settee, covering his face; easy, in his abandon, to read; easy to win sympathy at the hands of his friend.

" And this bonze," Marsden asked in the dim light. " Who is he?"

" Some relative of hers, I understand, on the father's side," he flung out, torn from his dream.

" A priest, yellow, lined, ready with the begging bowl—typical Chinese bonze," Marsden lashed. " A sort of brother-in-law for you!"

" Yes . . . the very antithesis of White Blossom and her father," Hewitt defended. " She, especially, is of the North: tall, slim, not like the Cantonese *grande dame*, speaking English like a woman of breeding, by Jove . . why shouldn't I marry her?"

Marsden leaned forward, flicking the cigar ash as he said: " That is just what your C.O. bars, I take it. You must not mind plain speech.

The truth is we don't mix well—East and West, you know. You can't get away from that."

"You mean the Eurasian part of the show—the kiddies?" he asked, shy at the trend.

"Yes."

"But I promised her," he pleaded.

"Yes. That makes it difficult; but you have to face it; this is a matter that affects your life—your whole life. At the moment I grant it is idyllic, beautiful. It warms me to hear you speak of love as it is . . . you soldier men are usually *blasé* . . . but remember this mixed marriage has been tried and dismally failed. Think how the opposing trends are bound to affect it: the soul-stifling results of this blend of the yellow and white; the aspirations of the white blood pushing a man for ever into the channel of affairs, the yellow blood holding him back, dragging him to the pit. And if he climbs, as he may, acknowledge the opposition he must beat down, how the cross-current in his blood causes him at one moment to run amok, at another to curry favour.

"Besides, what have the Eurasians done? Are they proud of their blood? Are they not for ever claiming ours? Will they ever build a nation . . . be anything, indeed, but a byword to the world and a misery to themselves?"

The boy leaned forward listening, his head in his hands. It was true. He knew it was true. He had not come through Sandhurst and the East without imbibing some of the doctrines

which make the English just what they are in the world. A white man does not marry a native. That is one of the things that is not done. It is as terrible in effect as that other means of ostracism—a white woman wedded to a nigger. Hewitt was aware of these facts ; but it failed to affect the issue. He looked over at Marsden and said :

" Yes—I know. It's all very damnable. But I have promised."

" And your colonel has given you twelve months' leave to think it over ! "

" Yes. Yet I have promised—and, don't think me a fool, sir ; but I would rather go out with her now and have done with it than break her heart."

Marsden sighed. " I'm afraid that brings us full circle," he said. " No—I would not have you break a promise—though, if it had not been for the accident of her presence here," he put it so, " you had decided to obey ? "

" She knew. Oh ! I told her. She knew I was coming and how, and when I was returning."

" Ah ! That explains many things," Marsden smiled. " I might have guessed it. Really, it was simple enough. Well—so you have decided to marry ? "

" Yes—at once, if it were possible . . . so that I can be with her and take care of her. . . . Don't you see the danger ? "

" Naturally. It is plain enough."

The boy looked over his shoulder as though

he would anticipate eavesdroppers. "I hate to suggest it," he said, "but it seems necessary to go through some form of marriage—like the Gretna Green, for instance—and trust to my honour to carry it through properly when we get home. . . ."

"Not necessary at all," Marsden laughed. "I can marry you fast enough." He sat back in his blue mess jacket, cummerbund and white drill, the gold on his cuffs gleaming, the very embodiment of authority and goodwill.

The boy looked up with a quick flush, then still with a trace of hesitance, he said: "Don't humbug me, sir. I can't stand it just now."

"I am not humbugging. I can marry you, if you both wish it, as securely as any parson."

Hewitt leaped from his place on the settee. "Can you? Are you sure? . . . You are not fooling me, are you? . . . You wouldn't . . ." He was round at the skipper's side, wringing his hand, ready to shout, but screening his desire, lest by chance he had misunderstood.

Marsden, red and flustered by his vehemence, could only jerk out: "Yes—of course . . . quite possible. Steady, my boy . . . go slow. Yes . . . and if you say the word . . . I'll give you mine to carry it through."

"Splendid!" He danced upright. "I must go and tell her. . . . Oh! you are a brick! I had no notion you could do that for us! We'll live it down! Live it down . . . anywhere . . ."

"Live what down?" Marsden roared, in spite of his misgivings.

"What my C.O. talked of . . . the taboo rubbish . . . the taboo!"

Marsden's face was grave again. "Never mind that now. Go and get her answer . . . go and see whether she will consent, for it is possible she will not look upon a marriage *here* as quite orthodox and binding . . ."

"But it is?"

"Of course."

"Then I know her answer—thank God!" In a moment he was off down the stairs, his voice ringing.

The light in the saloon was dim for some reason as he entered; but what did that matter? He scarcely noticed it. White Blossom was within, a fugitive from her father's house because of their intimacy, their love. That fact alone stood out. She was there, seductive, beautiful, awaiting him; the slave, as she put it, of her lord who would protect her from the long arm of her countrymen, which, even as the boy talked with Marsden, was stretched forth to wreck him.

He did not see as he crossed, stumbling against a chair, the loom of a figure crouching near the exit, ready, when he passed, to rise and escape. Yet it was there, tall, masked horribly, with a gigantic head, white, a cock's bill, arched and crowing derision.

He reached the door, calling: "White

Blossom ! White Blossom ! " and pushed upon it. The cabin was dark.

He opened and stepped within, again calling her name ; but no answer reached him. He found a box of matches and struck a light. No one there. No one in the room beyond. He pried about, lighting a lamp and shouting for Marsden ; then emerged upon the saloon.

A door opened farther up and a group of Chinese appeared in answer to his cries. The odour of burning joss-sticks pervaded the cabin. As he went towards them he stumbled over something lying on the deck and stooped to discover why. A sandbag passed above him as he bent and cushioned dully on the bulkhead.

Marsden entered, blowing his whistle, and reached his side : " What is it ? What's wrong ? " he asked.

The boy was fumbling at the figure of a man who lay quite still. . . . " She's gone," he said, with a curious choking utterance. " And the sentry is dead . . ."

The Chinamen crowded round. One carried a lute, another a drum. The scent of burning incense drifted past.

" Plenty too much bobbery ! " one said. " What can do ? "

" Get to hell into your room and stay there one time ! " Marsden answered, and drew his revolver. " Now ! One minute only ! "

They pressed upon each other, obeying as

the watch, with an officer leading, entered the saloon.

"Handcuffs and leg-irons!" Marsden ordered. "Round up that crowd aft . . . all the Chinamen on board. . . . One of you call the doctor, and get the sentry along to the deck-house. . . . Smart's the word!"

He left the cabin and went on the poop to march up and down, considering these events.

In a vague way he knew that he was in the midst of some stupid plot which might wreck the ship and his career; that women were somehow responsible for it, and that he had gone so far as to promise some sort of composition when the whole case was bankrupt of sense. Then came a glimmer which may be translated as hope—a chance, remote—very, very remote—that the women had vanished over the side. . . . He shrugged it out. Damnable, of course; cruel, vixenish, if examined in the light of plain humanity; but salvation, he put it so, for the boy.

## V

From the clear spaces far in the sou'-west came the beat of drums. The sails of *Sirius* added an intermittent tattoo mingled with a ripple as of hail, high up on mast and rigging. The ship lay off on the starboard tack, trailing beads in her wake and bowing the swell. She moved as a dream-ship on the stage of fairyland, gleaming ; the footlights dim, the breeze soft, spice-laden and warm with the humidity of the sou'-west monsoon.

There were no lights about and scarcely any need for them. Sea and sky were blended in one splendid sweep of translucent blue, the secret of which is held by tropic night when the winds are kind. Moonlight impinged upon her gilded trucks, her rigging, her boom irons, and fell upon her side, showing her great square ports, her brace-blocks, boats and cabins ; touched the brass of her wheel and binnacle and rails, making a picture of her, while the seas trailed lazily aft in tremulous whorls and spirals of silver light.

A bell struck in four double strokes of echoing clarity proclaimed it midnight, the repetition of it in mellower tones from the fo'c'sle showed that men still watched. The moon, white upon the

ship's decks, discovered a crew at work, others bound. Then from the bows a voice sang: "Lights bright and all's well," all in perfect harmony with the night. It might have been the ship's password to the new day as she crept without external clamour or the hint of any considerable danger down China Sea.

Yet it lay upon them. It kept its secret too; displayed no energy, and only those suggestions emerged which knowledge of his surroundings gave to Marsden, who ruled, and presently might be called upon to fight.

The islands with which the entrance to Canton River is studded were dimly visible astern; but not the hiding-place or prison of White Blossom and her companions. On the weather quarter was a junk; a group of those picturesque craft farther off; but no explanation of the bird-mask which had been found near the entrance to the deck-house. The steward, Cho-Lum, was there, quiet in spite of his irons; inclined to shrug the thing off as an indignity—but fair in the circumstances. He knew nothing. He was in bed when he heard the cry of those in the cabin. He got up to see what was the trouble, and was almost at once seized by the sailors. . . . The ladies? He had not seen them. They were in their cabin when he brought coffee to the captain's presence, and to the presence of the young officer. The steward was courtly in expression; indeed, he sometimes lapsed from the formula

adopted by those who speak Canton-English, and Marsden swore there was something in the boy's theory that he knew more than all the rest put together.

Three hours' search had produced this. Captain, officers, crew—all were at fault, the boy nearly in despair. They had twenty men in irons or bound to various ring-bolts, all protesting innocence and complaining either of wounds or of bonds. Hewitt lashing at them in the vernacular, promised unpleasant methods of compelling speech ; but the Chinamen smiled, remembering how little the English Fank-wei * understood torture. The six who had taken passage in the saloon were particularly venomous. They were merchants learned in the law, and would make big bobbery in the right quarter. Then Hewitt, with Marsden to prompt him, told them to do their worst, and pointed to the presence of their compatriots, fourteen of whom had emerged from the ship's forepeak when the trouble began, and presently would be tail-less. Was not that evidence of a conspiracy to take the ship . . . and in any case, where were the women ? If they chose to speak true words they would be liberated, otherwise they might stay where they were and watch the bullets fly when that junk got alongside, as presently no doubt she would.

They became articulate at this, craning to see.

* Foreign devil.

One tied by the main hatch began to yammer, then swiftly came the clipped speech of the steward, rasping curiosities from the vocabulary of the flowery land which produced silence. After that no one bewailed either bonds or wounds, and Marsden, with Hewitt and the chief, moved aft to prepare. It was a duty they no longer might postpone.

. . . .

The strange craft drew nearer, sailing in that light breeze, perhaps half a knot faster than the *Sirius*. They could see by using glasses the high stern and carved prow ; the insolent flicker of banners, flags and streamers which denote the coming of a Mandarin junk. They could hear the drum's roll and the crackers she fired in her comic opera approach, and knew that something more than a stage battle would develop.

She came down with sinister intent, bragging of her ability to wipe all foreign devils from the face of the sea. From her lair up there among the islands, inhabited and uninhabited, desolate, beautiful, she came ; islands teeming with placid agriculturists and bandit fishermen who had seen her on varying errands and in various moods—to-day acting the brigand, to-morrow the saint ; but all with appropriate noise.

And as she came, Marsden unlashed and stripped the guns he carried for such *rencontres* as this ; ordered powder and shot from the magazine, armed picked men with rifles, others

with pikes, and served out cutlasses to the rest. Then, while all were hot in the business of preparation, one of the after-guard raced from the lazarette, whither he had been despatched to fetch rifle cartridges, to say the Chinese ladies had been found shut up in the magazine.

Marsden heard the report with a dim smile. "Exit hope," was his thought, and instantly called to the boy, who, with some sort of forlorn notion that they might be found in the mizzen channel plates, was clambering about in search. He came sailing inboard, as Marsden phrased it, spread-eagled and alert to halt before the commander. "Found, sir! In the magazine! Good God!" he cried. "But safe?" his eyes registering the fact that he knew.

"Apparently. Go and look after them. I put them in your charge." Marsden became the C.O., the law-giver, and said: "See to them. We shall have the stink-pots flying about presently. Keep them out of it. . . . Quartermaster! Show Mr. Hewitt down."

Under his breath, as the two hurried off, came the prayer: "Lord! now lettest Thou Thy servant see clearly into the heart of this thing!" and added, as he walked aft whistling for a breeze, "lest I succumb before the madness of this boy. . . ."

No answer came to his prayer, nor breeze to his whistle. All dead flat. No miracles. No illusions—only the gossamer air of a lazy

monsoon charged with the breath of the islands. He came to the wheel and took a few turns athwartship, reading the signals as sailors do, then stood with levelled glasses, trying to discover, in the hotch-potch of masts and sail and towering cabins, what guns the junk carried ; his mind all the time occupied with this recrudescence of ruination, as he termed it, for the boy.

. . . .

The entrance to the lazarette was through a trap door in the pantry, leading by roomy steps into opaque darkness. Hewitt climbed down and started fumbling towards a chink of light which appeared beyond casks of sugar, beef, pork, sacks of potatoes, and the endless cases which are held in a ship's store-rooms.

He called as he went : " White Blossom ! White Blossom ! " And she came into the dim echo of light thrown by a lamp behind an opened door ; her arms wide, a smile in her eyes, his name on her lips : " My lord ! My dear, dear lord ! " And in a moment they were clasped.

She clung to him, sobbing, frightened as he had never seen her ; clung as he held her, discovering with shy touch how thin were her garments, discovering that she shivered, that he breathed fast, and that her feet were clad in silk slippers which matched in colour the jade-green tint of the open-sleeved garment she wore ; but thin, thin . . . that the dim light impinged on ankles and arms that were bare, and swore

behind clenched teeth that she suffered, while still he kissed her and held her wrapped in his arms, answering with caresses her clipped words of delight——

"Oh! and I thought . . . I thought you were killed. . . . I prayed forgetting to my gods, then asked the Invisible One who rules thy heaven . . . for mercy on poor White Blossom . . . for thy life . . . and thou art come. . . . So, forever I am His servant—forever, as also I am thine. . . ."

"But you are cold! You shiver, belovéd. You have no cloak . . . no——"

She snuggled close, her lips lifted. "We were taken suddenly as we prepared for sleep . . . what if it were so? You hold me and I burn; I shiver, but not with cold. I do not know why I shiver. . . . Cold comes not near. . . . I am less afraid . . . less, always less afraid in your arms. . . . I wish to stay always as now."

He glanced around. The quartermaster had gone up the stairs, and stood on guard in the pantry. To reach him it was necessary that Hewitt should go to the hatch; but she clung to him, trembling afresh, and he turned to soothe her. "Why, why, Sweet Blossom?" he begged.

"I fear this place. It is a tomb. If you beat on its sides there is no answer. Take me from it before they shut again the lid. . . ."

By degrees he calmed her with words. "Yes—we will go up. We will go again to your cabin,"

an assurance in which he had little faith, aware, indeed, that at any moment now the guns might speak, and that with them possibly the end was at hand. He held her love, her loveliness, her life, at this moment questioning how he might guard the triune glory that was his, and said swiftly in her jasmine-crowned ear :

" Have no fear. I will not leave you. You are mine, even as I am yours. . . . In an hour, belovéd, perhaps in two, if we win, you can be my wife . . . but first we must win. . . ."

" If we win," she interrupted. " What is that ? "

" On deck they are making ready to fight. If we drive away our enemy, we win and I marry——"

Her fingers seized on the buttons of his tunic, high up at his throat. " But who do we fight—and why ? "

" I know less than a fool. . . . Yet the junks approach, firing crackers and beating drums for war. . . ."

" Junks ? " she whispered. " For war or piracy ? "

" Who knows ? . . . I am to keep you here. My captain tells me I am to stay and defend this place if the worst comes and it is attacked. . . . Where are your maids, my belovéd ? They, too, are safe, are they not ? "

" Assuredly," she smiled. " But these junks are by chance . . . my father's, do you suppose ? "

" Why ? Do we not know your father ? Was he not kind—always ? "

She reached up, glanced about and whispered close in his ear : " Because, oh ! my lord, Chung-Fa, the bonze of Sai-wan, my kinsman, is here."

He sat quite still, his pulses cooling before this evidence of the hostility he had incurred, certain that it was true, even as he had foreseen ; but because it was essential to cull some word which might lessen the terror it inspired, he asked: " Are you certain that Chung-Fa was not at Sai-wan when we passed ? The captain saw his fire."

" His fire is always there ; but Chung-Fa is here. I have seen . . . we are here because, with a whip held over us, he drove us here. . . ."

A gun roared out its thunder on the deck above, and repercussions rolled, echoing between decks. White Blossom shrank in his arms and Hewitt called to the quartermaster, ordering him to bring cushions and more light from the cabins. Wraps, also ; then turned to find her more calm than since he came down.

" At last ! " she said, as one does who feels that action is a relief. " Was that our gun or the gun of our enemy ? "

" Ours, belovéd."

" I like that name," she whispered. " It is beautiful in your tongue."

" And in yours."

" Not beautiful as that."

A crash deafened them, the patter of shot on the ship's side. He took her in his arms, sitting on a case, shielding her. It seemed at that moment the timbers might be pierced ; but no shot entered. Noise, muffled and indistinct, came through the open hatchway ; the song sailors sing when they swing yards, make or take in sail. The ship leaned slightly on the other tack and the boy knew from his experience in the Bay she had gone about. He wondered why and asked at a tangent: " But what of the bonze . . . how can he be here ? "

" He came into our cabin as we prepare for sleep," she gave back, her cheek resting on his, her arms circling his neck, as his circled her waist. " I saw. He said, in our speech, ' Silence,' and lifted the whip. . . . We became very still. On his shoulders when he came was the head of a bird—large, with an evil smile . . . oh ! terreble . . . most terreble to consider. And as we ran to a corner, all close and with very little dress, he pushed back the bird head and I saw his face. It was Chung-Fa. My kinsman whom I have never seen angry till then. . . ."

The gunfire became intermittent far overhead. It boomed for these two as in a cavern, some round and resonant, others in a long whine, distant, less strident. When the crash fell they ceased speaking and sat expecting the end. When it died the talk went on—

" And when we were quite afraid he ordered us

to go before him out of the door and across the saloon and out at another. . . . I could hear your voice as we go by. You spoke with the captain ; but I might not call. Chung-Fa, the bird-head closed again upon his face, drove us on. He carried also a sword—naked in his hand . . .

" I think when I see him so very mad and unkind to me who learned wisdom at his knee, he want me less for Kang Che-lo than for the strange desire which come to men who serve our Lord Buddha, but see only a very ugly piece of wood ; painted perhaps, who smile always even if the thought of their servant is wickedness and crime. . . . I remember how he look at me and speak of the punishment which is for those who marry with the barbarian, tell me of death by the bamboo. . . ."

" Oh ! but surely ; he is a relative . . . he could not . . ."

" It matters very little in my country what happens to us if we be women, . . ." she answered with the complete calm of a perfect understanding. How deep and complete the boy scarcely conceded, rapt as he was and alive to the beauty of her presence and the delight in her speech.

Then came the quartermaster, bringing cushions, cloaks and a lamp, which he hung near the door of their prison. So they drew comfort from these things, built a settee of cases, spread rugs and snuggled down to await the moment when again they might go on deck. The light

threw strong shadows in that dim place—shadows which moved as the ship rolled, climbed over them drawing grotesque figures on the farther bulkhead, figures which thrilled and grew indefinite each time the guns crashed overhead.

"So it was Chung-Fa who brought you down," Hewitt complained, to distract her from the guns.

"Yes; he drive—he make us go fast. He was afraid you would see," said the clear young voice. "He pushed us in the room where you found us, locked the door, and, standing in the dark, said—presently he come to take me back to Ma-tong! But first, he said, 'I kill that barbarian you found on the sands. . . . Then I take you with me in a ship that draws near, and if you not obey me I tie you naked to the cross which stands within the walls of Ma-tong . . . because of this thing!'"—she flung out the word—"'this abomination which has come to thy life. . . . I take you there, I swear it by my gods; and I give you to the executioner so that you are sliced with knives, so that you die in the way ordered by our ancestors for all those women who give themselves to the Fank-wei who are our enemies.' . . ."

"Sliced! Good God, what did he mean?"

"They cut off the flesh from our bones . . . till no more is left on them. It is the last death of all," she answered, with the complete detachment of one who speaks of the commonplace.

"My God!"

He sat grim under this. He dared no more,

but the idea flared through him, leaving him cold in spite of the heavy air and the drifting fumes of black powder. And, again, as a noise of scuffling arose on deck, her voice went on—

" For that reason and because my father could not arrive in time to stay him, I ran, bringing my maids with me. . . .

" He came in the beginning of this terror to my house to tell me what he would do. He was verrey mad ; but required yet the answer of his god in this matter. Foam was on his lips. His eyes stare. He walked on the terrace before me with his yellow robe trailing, his other shoulder bare, making the noise of geese when they are alarmed . . . and when he was gone back to his god I sent messages to the agent of your ship asking for cabins for three who wished for them. Then they tell me when you sail and we came. . . . There was nothing else I can do, only marry Kang Che-lo. . . . You are not angly that I come ? "

He took her between his knees, drawing her near. " Happy, White Blossom ! Happy, beloved ! Don't you see that if you had not come I should have lost you for ever ? That we should have wandered in the shadows seeking always each other ? "

" No ! No ! No ! " she told him, her fingers on his lips to silence him, her eyes alight. " It is determined for us how we shall act. Always we are as clay in the hands of the potter who twists his wheel, shaping us as he will . . . you believe

that too. . . . Your God who is in heaven tell you that ? "

" Perhaps. I have not thought of it. . . . Yes—without doubt. . . . But—but how did the bonze come here ? "

" Verrey easily. He discovered through those who spy for him that we have gone to your ship, and I cannot die as his god desires, on the cross ; . . . then with the aid of a little paint and a boatman's dress, with one who is a woman to help him, he rowed my lord hither in a sampan, where joss-sticks burn to thank his god you are now his. Any other way he who is my uncle could not have come. The agent whom I have seen arrange that for me. . . ."

Hewitt whistled softly, visualising the scene as it glowed instantly in his mind ; the gorgeous, sunlit bay ; reflections everywhere as in a mirror, the *Yellow Jacket*, as he called his ship, standing in the stillness, her white sails hanging and ready to carry him away from White Blossom . . . the bonze, statuesque, rowing him thither. No wind. The world at siesta cowering from the sun.

" And when presently we sail," the voice of White Blossom resumed, " he find it difficult to come near the cabins which hold us. Therefore, when the opportunity occurs by the death of the steward, he ask the captain to let him be steward instead . . . all verrey easy to Chung-Fa. Then you see also how easy it became for him to speak with those who were living in the cabins. . . .

" Those men who play drum and lute in the cabin which was beyond mine were friends who would do what was required. They are of the Tong of the Yellow Robe, men who do the bidding of those priests who are their master—they are not merchants, as I think and tell you before. . . . Others who were in the ship were of this Tong also—coolies, who obey. And they arrange so that the ship was to be surrounded by junks. There would have been no difficulty . . . but," with her eyes lifted to his, her fingers in his hair, " because the potter who holds the wheel of our destiny saw my lord sorrowful and White Blossom in great danger of death, not having deserved it, he held calm the wind where the other junks lie so that they could not move. . . . Nothing else availed. The prayer of the bonze who is my kinsman, the joss-sticks he burn, all is useless—and thy slave is here with her lord. . . ."

" Happy lord ! " The boy smiled in her face, drawing it near.

" Happy, happy White Blossom," she returned, her cheek touching his—soft, fragrant as with the flower which gave her her name. " Nothing matters now—— "

" Nothing—only love."

. . . .

The night droned on and with it the noise of fighting—yells, cheers, gunfire. Sometimes the lazarette was foul with the reek of smoke ; sometimes chill with the draught which cleared it.

Amidst an immense and continuing turmoil the quartermaster passed from time to time, bringing messages from the captain.

They were doing well. . . . Everything quite right so far. Not so many wounded as might have been expected ; but tell Mr. Hewitt to stay below. The cabin ports might easily be pierced. . . . If Mr. Hewitt were wanted on deck Captain Marsden would send for him. Let him look after the ladies. . . . So it went on amidst the crash of guns.

Then came word after a stress, which kept Hewitt on thorns, that they were alongside the junk and the Chinese crew escaping—" taking to the boats, sir . . . jumpin' overboard for a froggin' match. . . ."

And White Blossom, her hand lifted to the boy who was her lord, reiterated : " A frogging match . . . what is that ? "

" Swimming, belovéd . . ."

" Like a frog ! Funny ! It make me wish to laugh."

He caught her to him. " Laugh in my arms, sweet ! Laugh with me ! "

Later the quartermaster came down to report that all the Chinese prisoners had been put on board the dismasted junk and the junk set adrift. . . . But one, the steward, could not be found; perhaps another also—of that they were uncertain. Someone said he had seen the steward falling overboard, but the captain had no faith in the story.

"Nor have I," said Hewitt, as the messenger again went up the ladder. "He did not come so far as this merely to drown in Nan-hai.* Belovéd . . . I should like to meet that bonze, and perhaps I may. . . ."

She clung to him instantly, her arms about his neck, his cheek pressed upon her breast. "No—no . . . he is strong and has also a sword, while my lord has none!" she urged.

"I have this," he smiled and touched his belt, and in the same moment became aware of sounds coming from the space beyond a wall of barrels.

The crash of gear falling on deck, where the crew swayed on a damaged yard, drowned it; yet he twisted, listening, ready for any emergency, while White Blossom clung to him, startled as he was. For a minute the tension was tremendous. Then Hewitt rose slowly, and leading her towards the stairs, said in her ear:

"Up the steps! Quickly. . . . Maids also!" He signed to them. "Stay on top!"

And as they obeyed, the boy faced about to meet two who lifted heads beyond that heap of barrels in the dusk.

At the same instant a stinkpot flung by one of them whizzed past and crashed on the farther bulkhead.

A deadly stench began almost at once to fill the lazarette. The explosion was small, but the stench vile. The boy had never come in contact

* China Sea.

with anything quite like it. It was pungent. The air he breathed seemed to pass like flame into his nostrils. He spluttered, a handkerchief held quickly to screen both nose and mouth. The lamp nearest the magazine went out. He fingered his pistol, the place becoming dimmer. He could see as in the gloaming two shadows gesticulating behind the barrier he skirted, going towards the trap door. He stooped, half choked, drawing his revolver, wondering dully what in the world they were all doing in that hole, then very slowly raised his head.

The two were no longer where he left them when that damned thing burst . . . only one remained. Perhaps ten feet separated them. He acknowledged it was sufficient and dropped to his knees. Again he choked, coughing horribly, yet levelled and fired——

In the dim light, in spite of the paroxysm which shook him, he saw the man clap hands to his head and fall backwards. He continued to scream when he could no longer be seen. Somewhere amidst the barrels and cases he lay squirming, while his companion, wherever he was, coughed without hindrance. Hewitt on his hands and knees, head lifted, his lungs half filled by that acrid taste which clung to him, stung and made him retch, racked by a cough he could not control, crept along the barrier towards the fresh air waiting at the trap. Still more slowly he moved. He had become amazingly weak. He

was angry because he was weak. He refused to credit it, spat out, yet continued to crawl. Behind him and drawing near came the second of the two men. He also was on all fours, trailing a sword which clanked, fumbling as though he were blind.

The sword he carried was one of the short, curved blades of Malay handicraft. But the man who carried it was blind, because of the stinkpot his fool companion had thrown. Had it not been for that small stupidity, the god of Sai-wan, wrinkled and obese, with a cavernous, bejewelled mouth set wide, would have won in the race against death. The bonze of Sai-wan, who was his servant, had less speed than the boy, less endurance. He seemed to lag in his pursuit. His breath came in quick grunts. They both ambled like great saurians, fumbling amidst fog at the edge of a dim stream running in a cavern. Still the bonze lagged, coughed, and for the first time fell on his face ; rose, coughed again, while the boy, at length in a flow of fresh air, heard, and, twisting in his tracks, saw what he saw. . . .

Two star-like pupils, set rather wide apart, blinking, very near the deck, greenish, synchronising with the cough which shook him . . . and at that, with a feeble shout, the boy fired and lay still.

He was coughing and nearly blind when the three women, looking down the open hatch, saw a man crawling towards the stairs. They had

heard the shots and took him for one who had been wounded. Then White Blossom, peering into the cavern, saw him as her lover and ran down the stairs, lifted him. With her maids' assistance she dragged him halfway to the top, and sat there crooning over him, his head in her lap, as at Ma-tong, helpless to get him higher.

Bending over him, shaken by the fumes, she sang as at Ma-tong. . . . "Mine! Mine! O belovéd. . . . Mine! as the gift of God. . . . Mine! Yet I lose. O God who art his God . . . not take him from me. . . . Not let him die, as the priest say at Ma-tong. . . . Have pity on poor Blossom, who miss him if he go to the sky. . . . As the gift of God—so he was mine . . . mine; yet I love and I pray—take also White Blossom if he go. . . ."

She crooned over him as a mother over her child.—"O my belovéd!" bent down, and with nervous fingers unfastened his tunic, stripped it back, leaned with her ear at his heart, his name still on her lips. . . . "Live—live, O my dear lord, for White Blossom. . . ."

. . . .

So Marsden and the officers found them as they came to their succour. . . . "Splendid, White Blossom!" gruffly greeting her as they carried them both on deck.

## VI

The boy perhaps heard. The "God who was his God," peradventure looked down on White Blossom and hearing her prayer made easy the path they both travelled; so that presently the boy awoke from his torpor and found her—"Half angel, half child," wholly beautiful, calling him back to life.

And when it was very plain to those who had rescued them that rest would complete their cure, Marsden and the doctor went softly from their cabin and, leaving them with the maids, shut the door upon them.

. . . .

So the night droned. At long intervals the boom of a gun jarred the ship's timbers, coming from the shadow of those three junks which still clung in the offing. A flash, a report, but nothing more, for *Sirius* was out of range—the breeze increasing.

Then dawn came out of the primrose east and found the wind already born, which answers to the challenge of the sun. Deep in the sou'-west, for an hour, mare's tails and other strange wild-fowl known to sailors as the enemies of calm, had streaked and flamed upon the darker

sky. The junks were fully revealed now and, standing up in purple against the glow, looked like the little castellated ships which guarded England when Alfred was king. Marsden, marching the poop, a telescope under his arm, decided that, *Sirius*, leaning over under bellying sails, might shake a tow-line at the trio and leave them standing.

Thereafter nothing mattered. Guns might sleep in their jackets, shot and powder go back to the magazine, for the ship had taken the bit in her teeth and was away at last for Anjer. The wind was a head one—it did not matter. The sou'-west monsoon had taken a new lease—well, it was a beat down China Sea instead of a run. More time for White Blossom and the boy to decide how beautiful was love ; more time for Marsden to study that section of the Prayer Book which treats of marriage . . .

. . . .

The deck chair still held Captain Marsden, when at three bells in the morning watch a new steward—the third since leaving Hong Kong—arrived and stood before him holding a salver containing tea, sugar, milk (*conservé*) and hot toast. Marsden had been up all night, all the day before, and the better half of the night before that. He said he was quite fit to stay another twenty-four hours, but he looked hungrily at the tea and drank before eating.

The new steward was one of "the young

gentlemen " from the deck-house. He had risen from the ashes of Cho-lum, who had vanished without asking a reference. As Marsden looked up, recognising the change, he saw in his mind's eye the person of the steward who had failed him. Five hours ago he had sat beside him on the main hatch, where he lay pouring incoherences upon the night. The phrases came in a jumble of Chinese and English ; not the pidgin-English of the Treaty ports, but the English of White Blossom, beautifully modulated when he spoke to her, with the note which barks when in the vernacular he pointed to the terrible end she must endure.

He revelled in this, and some part of it was comprehensible to Marsden ; but the greater passed him by—if you can pass words in any language when they are hissed through the hot spasms of death, with all the tenuous grip which remained of life. He lay there no longer a steward, no longer Cho-lum, but Chung-Fa, the bonze, shaven, tailless, as became a priest of the All-Wise Buddha who permits his servants to marry. As a sampan owner, as a boatman or " boy " in any capacity, it was necessary to wear a tail or admit dishonour ; as a steward the law held good, but now that he was dead and in his agony had twisted the thing from his scull, he could go his way to Nirvana, honoured, though tailless.

Others of the ship's crew had made the crossing also ; ten or a dozen were in the hands of the

doctor and his assistants ; but the passing of this man swayed Marsden more. It was obvious the peril they had undergone, the wounds and death of staunch sailors were all attributable to this bonze, yet in his heart Marsden found a certain admiration at war with his saner judgment. He could sympathise with the man and loathe him in the same interval of time. It was obvious what had occurred. The bonze was a scholar, he was also the relative and tutor of a very beautiful child in a country where children are given in marriage. Visions of Swift and Stella came in here, touched with a different discipline, laxer morality, the Eastern view of women. The relationship which existed was pushed aside—the sacred office in which he wrought was forgotten ; the civilisations this man had studied permitted the marriage of brother and sister, when they stood at the head of it as princes of the blood ; how then should it be accursed for the priest of Sai-wan to mate with his niece ?

But Chung-Fa, whether as steward, or sampan owner or " boy," was a man who stood for his faith, for his prejudices, if it please you, and nothing the skipper could discover would alter that . . .

Marsden was still thinking of these things when the boy appeared and called to know if he were busy. The answer went instantly in spite of the swift transition—" No ! Come along, and bring a chair."

And as Hewitt complied, he added : " Well ! I must say you look fit. . . . How's the lady ? "

" As well as I am, sir."

" Lucky man ! " He surveyed him over the rim of his poised cup. " Had your tea ? "

" No . . . might I have it up here ? "

" Of course." He glanced at the steward. " Run along, Number Three, and see what you can find for Mr. Hewitt." And when they were alone—" Now—when are we going to be married ?

" Just what I came to ask you, sir," said the boy.

" Quite. I read it in your scared appeal, to know if I were busy. . . . Well ? "

" No . . . but was I ? Well, the fact is we have given you so much trouble . . . and all those poor chaps wounded—I, as a matter of fact, did feel . . ."

" Good. Not another word. I know you well enough to guess how you feel. So we will forget that issue and you get on with the ceremony. Hum ! Suppose we say when the sun's over the foreyard ? "

" Oh ! Splendid . . . splendid ! " He turned in his chair and caught the skipper's hand.

" That settles it. I'll go and tell her."

He started off at once.

" What about your tea ? " Marsden hurled after him.

" Downstairs, sir. Two whacks ! " He vanished within the hurricane-house door and

suddenly re-emerged. "And there are the maids also . . . two more," and again vanished.

"Maids!" Marsden ejaculated. "Of course there are maids—luckily."

He sent a messenger to call the chief, and when he arrived, crammed to the eyes with the report he was to make, the skipper brought him up with a round turn—

"Let that wait, Talbot. I have to consider what sort of yarn we can fix up for the log book, and marry those children before any spooks can interfere . . . we've been supping with the devil and hadn't a long spoon. . . . Children! By heaven!—she herself can't be much more. But"—he thrust out his hands, his eyes registering all he had seen—"beautiful—beautiful as a dream. 'Half angel, half child,' that boy called her! True, and speaking English with the most fascinating slips. No—I am no longer astonished But for the fact I am the boy's guardian I would have said to him long ago, 'Marry her and damn the consequences. And, by George! that's exactly what I have done within the past ten minutes . . ."

"I could have sworn you would, sir," Talbot smiled.

"Could you? Of course—there you come in with your confounded youth. Tack a few years on your shoulders and we should have you arguing in favour of the stern parent. Racial difficulties would come in, just as they did when I advised

him. I do not know whether you would be the man to admit that all marriages are risky—even the best of them. You may hold other views. Well—I am not going to ask them. We marry in spite of the risks . . . besides," he looked wise over this, "I remembered that affair of Arnold's —Edwin, Matthew, which was it? The poet, you recollect, who married a Jap, by George! when he was no longer young, too, and seems to have been happy."

"I'll bet he was," Talbot chimed, enthusiastic in tone.

"Oh! Why—if one may ask?"

"Well, sir—at the start she wouldn't know enough to be able to interfere with the cook, and when she learned, the cook would be top dog."

"I see. You seem to have thought the thing out. Well—you can get church rigged for six bells and we will tie them up . . . and when I have done that, please God I'll get a sleep."

. . . .

A carillon of uncertain intervals heralded the striking of six bells as *Sirius*, bending to the breeze, moved away on a bee line for the Philippines. Once more, it appeared, the sun had succeeded in rising above the foreyard . . .

Church had been rigged in anticipation of this event. It stood there, the admirable and simply constructed temple of the shipboard world, based on the deck which a few hours ago had seen the

rush of boarders and trembled to the thud of guns. An awning formed its roof, hiding both masts and sails. Boats sitting on the skids, it is true, went some distance to spoil the ecclesiastical slope : but the flags with which the sides were draped produced a note of colour like stained glass windows which banished criticism, while the deck-house and the break of the poop, built of sturdy teak with round brass ports, provided a suggestion of the screen which hems a cathedral choir.

Across the after end was a table, which seemed to suggest an altar ; a Cross stood on it with two brass candlesticks. At one side was a book—the ship's log. Burning joss-sticks provided incense. Next the forward end was the reading desk, lectern and pulpit in one—the main deck capstan, in other words, draped with the ship's ensign, a cushion in its centre and on it the ship's prayer-book opened and weighted.

The men filed in and took seats, sailors, after-guard, petty officers—the bos'un conspicuous by his burly form and silver, dangling whistle—officers ; seventy-five all told, some few of them bandaged and all wearing the white dress of the tropics.

Hewitt in the hot-weather kit of the Buffs, his sword strapped high and carrying his helmet, entered with Talbot by his side—best man. Marsden followed, in full rig, the bride shimmering on his arm, veiled in delicate lace, a suggestion of jade in her colouring. He set her in place,

released her and crossed to mount the small platform which stood before the capstan.

At once the carillon ceased and Marsden began to read. Prayer followed prayer. Sometimes they kneeled. Then at the right moment the boy advanced with White Blossom at his side and stood ready. They were more visible now. The girl in her sheeny robe, her dark hair dressed with jasmin and plain beneath her veil ; her skin white with a pink glow in the cheeks ; her height and supple grace apparent to all those sailor men who thought they knew John Chinaman and his women, and now recognised how little they knew. She glanced up at the boy from time to time, catching the moment and the response with facility. Answered as all do when love is consummated—smiling, shy, in spite of the ordeal she had escaped, in spite of the ordeal she now faced . . .

All these men with their eyes upon her, critical of her attitude, her colouring, her speech, critical especially, perhaps, because it had been their lot to see from time to time the tawdry and noisy marriage processions in Chinese cities, where amidst a blare of crackers, joss-sticks, jerking chairs and swaying pig-tails, the bride, shut up in her casket, neither seems to be nor is a person of first importance. But here was some new phase in Chinese life. A girl who could walk, who could speak English and was glorious to look upon.

It did not take long—this ceremony. There was no choir to sing hymns, no organ to find music ; only the hum of the wind in sleeping sails high out of sight, the flutter of the flags and canvas which made their church, and the long, long hiss of the foam-streak sparkling and breaking alongside.

And when it was over, the boy's signet ring, much too large, on White Blossom's finger, they crossed to the altar and signed the ship's log, just there, where the captain told them, with the faith of all neophytes, smiling because they had faith.

Then Marsden made a little speech which the men cheered ; the boy responded and obtained his quota ; White Blossom bowed her thanks and the main brace was spliced—the two standing beside the steward to watch and take the salute.

. . . .

It was all very spontaneous and real. It is difficult to say who were most impressed, the actors or the ship's crew ; but White Blossom presently on the poop, in the full blaze of that glorious day, made plain her view.

She said : " The sailors make church verrey like you make it at the barracks behind Ma-tong—only you have drums where your padre stand, and he wear white gown, while our captain wore his dress of command. . . . It was strange to me . . . not like the church of my people . . . and I do not go carried in a box where I see nothing.

"But," she twisted to face him down there beside the hurricane-house door, "the music of the drums I do not miss, and the anger of the bonze, who was my uncle, is gone . . . gone with the joss-sticks he burn in order that he may win . . . and I, dear lord, look away in the distance where sometimes your eyes look, and wonder what your chiefs will say when they know I, too, sail in your ship for England?"

"Does it matter," he asked close in her ear, "what they say?"

"For you who are soldier, belovéd, it matters . . . and for White Blossom, if you are sad, it matters also . . ."

He faced her now. "You don't believe that I can be sad with you?" he asked, his eyes on hers.

She lifted her arms and drew him nearer. She looked up, her gaze soft, the scent of sandalwood wrapping her, and with her lips said:

"No . . . for if I think that I die . . ."

# PART III

# THE
# YELLOW ANGEL

## A STORY OF THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

In the air when it's calm there are luminous waves
  Sketching soft pictures of palms and of slaves
Which are ships, whose sails are agleam,
  Brought near by the magic of One so supreme,
That the distance, empurpled by space,
  Seems a trick of the sea when saying its grace.

The ripples lift head like a sigh
  As you circle in circles all day,
And the blue of the sea is the blue of the sky
  Blending in waves with blues that are grey;
    Nautilus twisting
    Pink shell listing;
Sprites known as pilots flashing in play
    Round the sharp stem,
    Each track like a gem—
All still in the world but the fish and their prey.

MEN who traffic in collaterals, or as they are sometimes termed, sideshows, should not express surprise if occasionally the thing gets up and bites.

For this reason alone it was unwise of Herman to buy the barque with a square stern, quarter-galleries and big, square ports ; for Herman was not a shipowner or a shipbroker ; he was a shipper, which is a horse of another colour. Unluckily for Herman and some others who sailed in her, the barque was cheap—not because she was worn out ; but because in the modern replica of the Ratcliff Highway she was called the *Yellow Angel.*

If you had told Herman she was called the *Yellow Angel* he would have been no wiser. He would have searched Lloyd's list and replied that no ship was registered in that name. If you had persisted and told him it was unwise to touch live wire unless you are wearing the right kind of gloves, and that a proverb in Chinese characters which said : " He who rides upon a tiger can never dismount " was carven on her scroll-board, he might have examined the scroll and then passed you for a lunatic. That would have happened because Herman, who may once have spelled his name with two n's, had no imagination.

Now it was the Chinese steward of an adjoining ship who happened to be on board when Herman came to look at her, who read the man his riddle.

" That belong my cuntly-pidgin," he said, in the curious Canton-English by which he earned his bread. " In Hangkow, where I go back one time, that piecee liting allee samee speak—' Suppose you lide on tigah you nevah mo'e can

walkee one time on two foot.' " He expanded his shoulders and rolled out : " *Chi — hu — nan — hsia !* " and again more slowly than before, " *Chi — hu — nan — hsia !* " then, seeing Herman's puzzled frown, returned to translation. " S'pose you get on tigah back one time. All light . . . makee hold tight. Can do. S'pose bye'm by tired, wantee go sleep one time, you getee off tigah back . . . then tigah he turn lound plenty quick an' make eat you fo' suppah. That velly bad for you. You die. Tigah put you in belly so he no mo'e wanchee suppah. Bad ! Velly muchee bad fo' you. Lide always. Sleep on tigah back. Nevah tly get off . . . Oh, yes-sir . . . then bym-by tigah die one time . . . see ? "

His hands went out in explanation as one who would add—" After all if you can't see now —why . . ."

He had a method of clucking out words that amused Herman, who told him he talked like an old hen, a slur with which the man made no quarrel. " If I no talkee like ole hen," he said, " I talk allee same you. . . . Wuff, wuff, wuff ! " He became gruff and his eyes closed to thin slits. " No can do ! "

Herman wondered what he meant. Evidently something amused him. Curious chaps, Chinamen. Funny notion that, about the tiger—if it were true ! Of course, any one who was fool enough to try to ride a tiger deserved

all . . . well ! there you are. What could you expect ?

Herman came back from this excursion into the wise sayings of a nation in those days still ruled by the Son of Heaven, with the air of a man who if once he were seated on a tiger would ride for ever. He walked round the deck of this barque with the square stern, quarter-galleries and great square ports, through which one might gaze at the sea, with the imagination of a person who sat all day on a stool in an office in St. Mary Axe. He prodded at her timbers with a footy penknife, shook her backstays as though he could measure their strength by his own, and stared out of the ports at the water in the docks—slimed, coated with dust and corks and chips of wood, yet saw nothing sinister in her derelict state.

. . . .

There was no crew on the barque. Long ago they had been paid off, gone about their business, married, died, gone to prison rather than sail in her.

When Herman came to look at her she was in a little cul-de-sac of the docks somewhere in the Isle of Dogs, which is far east in London ; a place inhabited by ships, policemen, barges, lumpers and the long-shore folk whom some people not otherwise blind take for sailors. On her gangway was a notice not uncommon in those days, nailed up for all to read who could. It said : "FOR SALE," in letters at least a foot long.

There was no mystery about that. She belonged to an era which was passing. Steamboats were multiplying and the beautiful clippers, which had learned how to run from Yangtse-Kiang to Dungeness in ninety-five days, were being pushed to the wall and would never again come booming up Channel, clothed to the trucks in snowy canvas. They would go to sea as this barque with the square stern went when Herman set her spinning, with sails cut down, masts cut down, crew cut down—to fight or die as is the fate of all winged things at sea from which great feathers have been plucked.

Herman had no knowledge of the sea nor of these facts. He was not a sailor ; he was a business man who happened to be interested in freights and cargo, who thought it would be cheaper to own ships than to charter them. And when the Chinese person had taken himself over the gangway Herman sought out the shipkeeper and presently returned to that rather wonderful scroll with its " funny " legend.

It was of teak wood, as indeed was the whole front of the cabin, stanchions, ladders, doors and the gratings which were before it. But the scroll chained him. He could not leave it. It was heraldic in appearance, carrying a coat of arms, shield, a ducal crown and draped flags couchant beneath it. It took the form of a triple sweep, the centre being the highest, the two sides ending in a kind of volute, very much in the manner of

Corinthian capitals. The whole was roped, as sailors say, with teak upon a grating background. Behind this was a rabbit hutch, also of teak, crowned by a bucket rack ; while behind it was a wired-in space—a sort of run, perhaps—kept firm with teak rails.

Herman stood looking at this piece with the shipkeeper beside him. In spite of the Chinese reading he still expected to find on the ribbon lying beneath the shield some Latin phrase which might give him a clue to her owners—like *sic itur ad astra*, or what, perhaps, would be more to the point, *sic vos non vobis*—which would, after all, be the lot of the majority of those who would read it in the days that were coming. But it held none. Obviously it was intended to carry a legend of some kind—yet it was bare, and the Chinese characters seemed to have been superimposed upon it and upon the grating. They were gilded, too, like the crown and the spear-points of the flagstaffs.

" Funny ! " Herman looked at the shipkeeper with the word. " No name. No owner. No history. No letter ! " He referred here to her class. " Must have been a country-wallah some time or other, I suppose ? "

The shipkeeper who had a modicum of nous, and, in the right company, loquacity, remained dumb. He knew nothing about her, hadn't been in China or in country-wallahs. He wasn't quite sure if he could read what was writ up there, not

without his specs he couldn't—an' they was at 'ome.

"But her name, man . . . the ship's name isn't even on her bow or stern!"

Again the shipkeeper shook a puzzled head, exercising his mother wit. "That's true, sir; quite true. An' no name's on her buckets, or bell or lifebuoys . . . all wiped out seemin'ly."

"But why?"

"Paint," said the oracle. "Bin painted by contrac', I expect. No time fer fal-lals like names an' ribbings. . . . P'r'aps, sir, they thought to give them uz bought her the job o' findin' her a name." He looked mysterious over this. "Might just so well, sir, come to think on it. After all, if you buy her, she-m yourn, an' her'll be homier-like wi' the name you put on her starn an' bows. A ship uz has run out of her letter might just so well have a new name an' a done wi' it—so fur as I can see, sir."

Herman smiled broadly. He knew the shipkeeper was romancing, not because he knew anything of ships and sailors, but because when he stepped from the path in the world which he knew to a new causeway among ships he came equipped with a full knowledge of the subtleties demanded of men of enterprise. If the ship proved sound after survey by his own man he would buy her. What's in a name?

Again he looked up, bluff, hearty—pointing to an acquaintance with the East, which had not

come to him through talk with the shipkeeper—"Better call her *Tiger*."

And the dock people, when the shipkeeper made this public, smiled as men will who know just how many ratlines go to the futtock-shrouds of a China clipper.

So Herman bought her and went home well pleased. She was built of hard wood, copper fastened, and in 1878, the year which saw him registered owner, she was thirty years old and had perhaps sixty more up her sleeve. That would see Herman under the sod, and in the interval provide the dividends, without which folk are unable to shine. The financier who occupied the other seat in the office at St. Mary Axe, and who found part of the price, was exigeant on this head. "It would be zomezing of a zurprise to zose uzzers," he decided, "who 'ad giffen 'er ze go-pye."

A week after the cheque had passed, Herman set to work to make things hum. He gave the vessel a new coat of paint, relieved her of some of her kites and affixed the name he had chosen on bow and stern. Then he found a skipper willing to take charge of her, and set about her lading in the old-time fashion.

She was bound to Rosario, a port on the Parana, far from the sea, and when she was nearly ready Captain King, who was recently home from the East, looked about him for a crew. The mate had been occupied for some time in this. He

said that it appeared easier to find the ship two cargoes. For some reason the men would have nothing to do with the *Tiger*. They came down to look at her, sometimes in charge of crimps, quite ready to sail ; but they returned whence they came, leaving such illuminating scraps as— " that's 'er ! Wot I tell yer ? *Tiger* ? Not it. Ast them as knows 'er . . ." for skipper and owner and mate to digest ; but never in any case going into details. Captain King honestly was puzzled. He had seen the barque ship-rigged in Hong Kong, taut and trim as a man-o'-war, with a crew of eighty or ninety men on board ; but he could say nothing on that head, for he had agreed to run her with twenty-two all told.

The financier said it was her name. Herman laughed at that, remembering its origin, and asserted blandly : " Why they don't know it ! " King agreed that it was impossible ; but as it was still more impossible to change it, once having christened her, the less said on that the better. Besides, King was sure of finding a crew. He said if he could not find one he would eat her. The two agreed, smiling over this, it would be a hard meal. Nevertheless, a week later, aided by various persons known as crimps and boarding-house masters, who operated a system similar to the dear defunct press-gang, Captain King was as good as his word.

He was not very proud of his men now they were

on board ; nor of the method by which only it had been possible to obtain them. On the other hand, who ever heard of a vessel being laid by the heels for want of a crew in those days ? The notion never stirred. Yet King was not proud of them. They spoke so many languages when presently they could talk, that he had difficulty in persuading them to understand his.

Having shipped his crew, however, nothing remained but to get to sea.

So it came about that on February 25th, 1879, three months after the barque had changed hands, the *Tiger* took steam, as it was called, and moved once more to the gates of the Thames. She moved in the wake of a tug which struck foam out of the old river and wakened the reaches with a horn which made a noise like the cry of a sick elephant ; while England shed tears at her departure. It was wet. The mists were out. Few saw her pass.

They came to the Nore through driving rain that blurred the landscape, hid the old windmills and lay upon the estuary like soup. As an additional affront, if one were needed, the crew, which consisted of two mates, bo'sun, carpenter, sailmaker, cook, steward, four boys and ten able seamen, were, as far as the able seamen were concerned, lying about in the fo'c'sle visibly unable to sit up.

Drugged or drunk by the thoughtful crimp who had shepherded them was the verdict of those who

looked in to see how they fared. It matters very little which of the two formulas you adopt, either was sufficiently drastic. The skipper recognising how successful had been his success, decided to get into the Downs and anchor. It was the only rational course to plan in face of the weather which came booming to greet them as they opened the cliffs beyond North Foreland. Here the tug kept her dancing, but could do little more. The towline twanged and clipped the rising sea ; it sufficed for little else. So they crept in behind the sands and cast anchor.

As they lay off Deal that night, staring through the mist at the shingle-piled beach, the skipper and pilot marched the poop, discussing the outlook. The *Tiger's* poop was long, which was a feature of the fine old ships of her period. As a matter of detail it reached half way to the main mast and there terminated with the scroll board which had so puzzled Herman.

As the two men came in their walk to the forward end of it, the pilot halted, turned and leaned over the wired-in space, questioning : " Hallo ! What have you got here, Cap'n . . . not rabbits ? "

" One," came the answer, as King continued his walk. It was the weather and the state of his crew that troubled him, not rabbits. " Doe, they tell me," he explained, as the pilot rejoined him, " one of the few things I took over. Going to have a family I believe."

Actually there were three does all in similar condition.

"Took them over from Cap'n Masters, sir?" the pilot asked.

"No. I never saw him or his owners."

"True . . . I was forgetting. He died at sea, didn't he?"

"I know nothing of him. I took the thing over from the shipkeeper. I supposed he had been in touch with him and that he made it a point."

"As a matter of fact," said the pilot, "there's no sort of doubt but what he died and was buried at sea. I read it in the papers soon after the ship came in—so, unless the shipkeeper was one of her crew that voyage, he couldn't have known him. Several of the men died, too, on the way home."

The captain paused and said: "Died at sea, eh? . . . Good! then you will be able to give me her name. What was it?"

"There you have me, sir. It's some time ago. I don't know. But she had a name when your people bought her?"

"She had none."

They continued to walk as before. The pilot went on: "That's curious! I remember there was some kind of mystery about it at the time. That's two, perhaps two and a half years agone. You may have been away at sea . . ."

"I was. I commanded a country-wallah out

of Bombay as far back as '75 and only got home last January. No—I heard nothing . . ."

"Any difficulty getting this crew of yourn, Cap'n?" the pilot questioned, as they reached again the forward end of their march.

"Devilish."

"Any reason given why?"

"None that I heard."

"Curious!" The pilot accentuated the word, stolidly turning, his eyes on the deck.

The captain halted now. "What's curious?" he demanded. "I don't understand."

"How things fall out, sir. Lord! just consider this weather, for instance. If we had a sober crew we would be round the South Foreland by now and you would be booming—just booming. The wind's sou'-east so near as makes no odds. You'd be away down Channel and probably out of it before the wind draws to the west'rd again. Anyway you'd be clear enough of the land to make use of it—and now! Well, look at it . . ."

The captain had looked at it, was looking at it at that moment. "I was asking," he said, "what is there curious about my not having found out why it was difficult to get a crew? That's what I want explained."

The pilot strode on as before, a tubby personage with shaven lips and chin, and a fringe of white beard like a curtain beneath.

"An' that's what I'm drivin' at, sir. The weather which has kep' us about an' now makes

it wise fer us to get into the Downs . . . your difficulty with gettin' a crew is at the back o' that, an' at the back o' that again is the reason why you had to take 'em aboard drunk as forty top-s'l sheet blocks, as you might say, so's they won't be askin' too many questions. Downy, that. An' here we are anchored off Deal where the only chap who knows anything about what happened last voyage has hoist his pennant an' means to bide. He was most of two years in this ship on the last trips she made, an' what he don't know of her an' her skipper, an' her owners ain't worth learnin' . . ."

Captain King did not take this up immediately. He was a quiet man, inclined to scepticism and harassed at the moment more by the loss of time than by investigations into the ethics of crew-getting. Yet he was troubled. He could not forget what he had heard. Words and sentences recurred as he walked. People had died during this last voyage ; well, such things happened ; but if he was to be the subject of speculation and mystery, it was going to be unpleasant for somebody beside himself and his crew.

It occurred to him that possibly the pilot was one of those folk who find mystery and fatalism in the most ordinary affairs of life, and carried on in this fashion for the love of talk. He was to be plagued it seemed. What was to plague him ? Who ? Perhaps this rotund individual had a bee in his bonnet which took the form of ghosts who presently would materialise on the yards, or

the rabbit hutch ! He marched to the binnacle, took out the lamp and permitted the light to fall so that the pilot's face was visible in the mist . . .

Hum ! No. That wasn't it. Too sturdy ; not one to be troubled by whimsies. He opened the lamp, lighted his pipe at the flame and returned it to the binnacle. " Could you put your hand on this man ? " he asked.

" Easy as knife it if he's not away afloat."

" What does he do for a living ? "

" Hobbler. Bought a share in a boat with the last money he took out of this identical ship, sir."

" I'd like to see him," the skipper decided, " if he's about. Hoist our light for a boat. We may get hold of him so."

He walked a few minutes in silence, pulling at his pipe and watching the pilot make signals for communication with the shore. Noted the answer and rejoined : " Now we shall see what we shall see, eh, pilot ? It's not the kind of game I care about. I think I can trust my owner, but he knows less than I do—and there you are. I consider it wants looking into, but you will have to pull him out if he comes off."

" You leave that to me, sir. And if I make free with your grog, too free, as the sayin' is, just tip me the wink. I'll see to *him*."

They walked as before, up and down, up and down, smoking, staring from behind the dodger at the driving rain, listening to the scream of the wind sweeping, high up amidst the yards and

rigging. Once a boat came thrashing to seaward and passed them broad off in a halo of spray. In the distance ships' lights appeared; far on the starboard hand one which was green marked the end of the pier; behind it a blur of lights all curtained by the rain.

Half an hour passed. The signal had been repeated and answered from the look-out. At length a boat drew near. She punched out in a driving mist of spray and dropped a reefed lug alongside. "Ship ahoy!"

The pilot looked over as a line was flung and hailed: "Bill Sheppard happen to be in that boat, matee?"

"Naa!"

"Know where he is?"

"Yaas!"

"Bring him out along. Tell him Bob Richards is aboard and wants to see him particular."

"Yaas! What barque's that?"

"*Tiger*, of London."

"Right! I'll bring him off . . . let go there, bow!"

A sweep got hold of her, twisted her, and the lug rose in a chatter of oars and blocks as the sail filled.

"Fine craft!" the skipper announced as they leaned over watching.

"And fine men," the pilot added, "get the next from where you will. Men that can't make a mistake in a boat."

## II

Eight bells !

A clanging interlude, struck by various hands on ships mist-bound and tied to the anchorage. Far off the sound of a fog signal reiterated, mournful, from the South Sand Head. Driving rain enclosing all as in a vault.

Midnight was the hour designated by that group of bell sounds. Weather of the kind known by Scots as "a wee bit saft," pointing to the reticence of that nation. The Downs smothered. Lights here and there misty, blurred ; small craft moving amidst the spume on either hand ; but of the forty or fifty sail of ships waiting under the sands, not a shadow.

The skipper and pilot were below, the mate in charge, when towards one bell the flurry of a boat's sail in the wind and bumps on the gangway, brought the two men to the head of the companion stairs. The pilot looked over the side and hailed : "Have you got him ?" And a voice came from the boat :

"Aye, that's me ! Rousted me out just I'm turned in," in accents which verged on falsetto. "Not for any other soul would I have come out this night, Bob Richards, you can bet high on

that an' win. You can take yer solemn affey-davey if you will, or . . . "

" Bill Sheppard ! " the pilot chimed. " I'd know you in a thousand, even if you was in a sack. Come on board, my son . . . come on board."

" Think I'm goin' to fandango 'ere ? " Sheppard grumbled, clutching the ladder as the boat swerved near. " Likely, ain't it ? "

" Come a-board an' not so much chin," the pilot found to encourage him.

He climbed in silence. The ladder kicked as the seas swept past. He climbed until his head was level with the top of the bulwarks, then paused, glancing about the deck, staring up at the skidds.

" Wot ship's this ? " he questioned, halted, abrupt.

" *Tiger*, my son, of London. Barque, not ship. Waitin' in the Downs for clear weather. Get along a-board."

The boatman moved as requested. He moved more slowly the farther he went. He returned to the gangway and passed his hand over the carved teak side-panels. His fingers went up to scratch his chin. " Show us that light ! " he demanded.

The pilot walked nearer, swinging a globe lamp. The boatman took it and pushed it close to the teak. He gave it back decided.

" *Tiger*, be blowed ! " said he, and crossed to look up at the barque's escutcheon. The skipper leaned over the rail watching. " Give us that

lamp again," said the man, and on the pilot conceding this he flashed it about and about. The rain drove past the blur it threw. Wind raved high up about the doublings of masts, which were wrapped in mist.

"Well?" said the pilot.

The boatman crossed amidships and stood beside the carved stanchions. He flashed the lamp up and down them, muttering "*Tiger* be damned . . . blimey! . . . 'Oo'd a thought. . . . *Tiger*, eh?" He rolled a cask that stood near and climbed upon it, holding the light high. "*Tiger*!" he said far up in his head. "What? That the bloomin' gime, is it? Not 'alf!" He pushed the lamp with the light thrown up, so that it touched the scroll—"Wot d'ye call that, Bob Richards? Is that Christian writin' or is it Chinee?"

"Chinee," said the pilot, "and what of it?"

"Everything . . . everything's of it. Every bloomin' thing as ever 'appened have to do wiv that sparboard, if I'm asked. Everything. . . . *Tiger*, is she? I'd have you know I'm not a fool, mate, an' I'm not gone off me tater. . . . So? I'd take it kind of you to own up what you're after wi' your *Tiger*, o' London. . . . *Tiger*! Lumme! she's no more *Tiger* than wot I am—not 'alf. She's the *Yella Angel* . . . that's wot she is, an' I'm not likely to ferget it. Nor them that wuz in 'er when we . . ." he broke off in extreme falsetto, his lips working, his eyes

scared as he lifted the light high to examine the pilot.

And quite suddenly he moved towards the gangway.

"I dun-no wot you want wi' me, mate, to 'av me out 'ere this time o' night . . . an' it blowin' nigh 'alf a gale ; but I do know I'm goin' back ashore again . . . just so soon uz ever I can get me boat up . . ."

The pilot went close and took him by the arm.

"Don't be a galoot," he said. "You are doin' nothin' of the kind. Not yet, you aren't . . . why ! What sort of a mate d'ye take me for to think I'd let you go without so much as a drink to warm you ? Come inside ! This barque's name is *Tiger*, of London. Maybe she's bought the gear you speak of an' recognise. Come inside ! I want you to see Cap'n King, in case he wants a boatman. Lord ! but if you cut up this dido every time you board a strange ship I wouldn't give much for your share. Leave it to me ! What if she has got Chinee writin' on her fancy work ? She's not goin' to bite you, is she ? Leave it to me ! Cap'n King ! " he raised his voice. "Would you be so good as to speak to this chap. He's a likely boatman if you should happen to want his services, sir. An old ship-mate that sailed wi' me in the *Cutty Sark* . . ."

King came down the ladder clutching at his sou'-wester, the wind ballooning his long coat. "Thank you for coming off, my lad," he said

" I shall be glad to give you any jobs if I happen to be in the Downs at any time. As for the ship's name, I think I can satisfy you there if you will come into the cabin . . ."

" No, sir ! No, you don't ! " came swiftly in response. " Do I look like a chap uz doesn't know wot he knows ? A glass o' grog is one thing ; but out 'ere, sir, on the capstan-'ead is the place for the likes o' me, not in your cabin, sir. . . . An' between ourselves, cap'n, you an' me an' 'im," he pointed finally to the pilot, " I wouldn't go into her cabin w'ether she's got *Tiger* in 'er log an' on 'er bulk'ead an' writ acrost the till o' the cap'n's shavin' box—axing your pardon, sir, for the word—not if you'd pay me. She's no more the *Tiger*, sir, than I am. She's the *Yella Angel* out o' London, an' 'er port o' registry is Aberdeen. An' if I don' know 'er, then I don't know nothin' an' never will."

" Have you ever heard of a ship called the *Yellow Angel*, Pilot ? " King asked.

" No, sir. I have not."

And with that he moved away across the grating and entered the cabin chuckling. " I'll get that drink we were talking about," he called to them.

King turned to the boatman afresh : " Where did she trade when you knew her ? "

" China. Home wi' tea, sir."

" Who were her owners ? "

" There you have me jammed," said the man. " I don' know."

"What house flag did she fly?"

"House flag?" He looked into the driving gale and shivered. "God knows wot it were. The only flag I ever see at 'er mast-'ead were yellow."

"All yellow? No cross, ball, crown or stars?"

"Never seen any, sir."

"But that is the quarantine flag, lad. Surely you know that?"

"I'm not sure wot I know ner yet wot I don't know w'en I come to think o' the *Yella Angel*," the boatman mumbled. "If that's any 'elp, why there it is, sir, an' welcome."

The pilot returned, carrying a tray holding glasses and a couple of bottles. "If you won't come in out of the rain an' be sensible, Bill, why we must wet it here . . . though, if you ask me, my spare oilskins are at home on the piany an' I look like gettin' damp." He turned to the skipper and spatchcocked, "with your permission, sir," placed the tray and took a bottle by the neck. "I s'pose it's rum, mate, as always?" he asked.

"Rum it is, an' thank 'ee," said the boatman, the tail of his eye on the glass.

The pilot poured and handed to each in turn, nodded over his own portion with the words—"Here's to us, an' many of 'em," and drank.

They made a curious group standing there under the skidds, the light of a deck lamp touching their gleaming oilskins. Captain King tall and finely built, clean shaven, and clad in sou'-

wester and long coat ; the pilot short and tubby with the white fringe of his beard thrust out as he leaned forward with raised glass, his eyes shrewd and ferrety on the boatman, and that small personage, dark, spare, strung taut in spite of his lack of education ; nervous, shadows lurking which he alone of the trio could see ; the darkness firm and solid with the weight of wind—a man anxious to be gone, but succumbing to the grog.

" And where," King asked, " did you go in this ship with the yellow house flag ? "

" Yellow house flag . . . yellow, sir, be damned ! " the pilot exploded. " Who ever heard tell of a yellow house . . ."

" Give him his head," King blazed, and the boatman looked up to substantiate with : " The only flag she ever 'oisted, bar 'er ensign, were yellow . . . yellow as mustard an' twice as nasty. I know. I were in her going on fer three year."

" Where ? "

" First voyage China, a place called Kin Chau, where we loaded tea an' pelts. A couple o' rats come aboard likewise, uz big as rabbits, an' the skipper made a run for 'em abaft the sparboard up there," he jerked to indicate the scroll. " Sez 'e, ' I'm goin' to breed 'em an' get a coat out of 'em fer the missis,' 'e sez. An' 'e sat down to watch 'em . . . fifty there were out o' them two afore we got 'ome, an' I reckon that made the coat all right . . . but there's twenty-seven men afore the mast, six boys, two mates an' three flunkeys

dead out o' the crowd afore we reached London docks . . . that's wot."

He held out his glass. The pilot refilled and he drank, but less quickly, smacking his lips. He fumbled for his pipe, filled and lighted it, the pilot holding a match, the skipper plying him with questions . . . "Big as rabbits you say?" and the pilot in comment, "I shouldn't wonder. China, sir. The world stands still there, I'm told. Lots of time to grow . . . some kind of a sacred beast probably, bred for the joss-house. Go on! Twenty-seven men and six boys is thirty-three, and two mates is thirty-five an' three stewards is thirty-eight . . . Lumme! no wonder her flag was yellow every time you see it hoisted. An' you—did you take sick?"

"If I'd bin sick, think I'd gone a second trip in 'er? Garn!" he sipped derision, and smoked again. "I sailed out o' London wi' 'er, an' the skipper sailed an' the chief 'e sailed—but fer the rest we 'ad a noo crowd. Also a noo trade. She's done as a tea-clipper. Instead o' ninety-eight all told we bowl aw'y fer Rosario wi' twenty-eight. Yards gone from the mizzen, skys'ls took out of her, an' on the trip twenty-two of us died afore we got to the Plate an' I took an' run soon uz ever we're tied up . . .

"Ever bin in Rosario, Bob . . . seen the bloomin' Plate? No. Well, it's a river wi'out no sides to it or towns uz you can see bar Monte Video, an' there's more mud-banks to it than 'ud

patch hell a mile. Lucky if you touch light . . . a sort o' James an' Mary's fer further than I'd like to swear for. So you go on an' on, nothin' to see bar the peasoup river till bye'm by you come to the narrows an' run up against the trees. Trees everywhere presently. Close in round you, archin' over'ead, droppin' nuts an' beetles an' spiders on you as you go sweepin' up in under 'em. Monkeys, too, chatterin', cussin' you fer disturbin' their kids ; parrots screamin' . . . a re'glar menagerie of all the damned creepin' an' flyin' an' swimmin' things old Noah stowed away behind the stringers fer dunnage in case 'is cargo shifted . . .

" There wuz so many anti-kafusalem beasts about I got bit afore I left the wheel. A thing like the palm o' your 'and wiv legs growin' out of the edges took a piece out o' me an' I bolted. The old man got 'old of 'er, an' a spider so big as a plate come down on the end of a string thick uz a bit o' rattlin' stuff out o' the trees an' nipped a piece out of 'is ear. 'E let go the wheel likewise. I heard 'im singin' out, an' when I look at 'im I see 'e's black ! That filled me up.

" I got away for'ard. I'm not goin' back aft again not if she 'its the bloomin' side out o' the Parana. I'm fed up wi' rats an' lice an' fleas an' bugs an' cockroaches so big uz 'ummin'-birds, an' cockatoos an' monkeys. I don't want to see 'em ever again. I'm not fit fer that kind o' game . . . they make me squirm—tri-antelopes, too.

Ever seen *them?* Pray God you won't. I waited till dark. They'd stuck us at a place in mid-stream ; give us bags o' yellow stuff to smell an' black stuff to drink, an' says at the end o' thirty days you'll either all be well or dead. An' off 'ome they go.

" That's the Parana, that is. Rosario its chief capital if it's still there. So I come out of 'er an' out of it quick, just uz I'm gettin' out o' this now, mate . . . an' don't you say aught to stop me, fer I wouldn't tend wot you call the *Tiger*, not fer the worth of 'er. . . ."

He tossed off the last of his rum, clapped the glass so hard on the capstan-head that it shivered, and was away aft like a boy, calling for his boat.

King and the pilot looked at each other—

" Daft," said the skipper.

" Dang me if I know what to think, sir—an' that's the truth."

They moved up the ladder to see what happened. The boatman was climbing the taffrail. They need have felt no anxiety, for he was as sober as they were, and alive to the eccentricities of ladders swinging over a vessel's stern or dangling at the end of a boom.

The men were hoisting their lug when the skipper arrived. A shout met his ear. " Let go ! " and after that, " haul in aboard ! " Then, with a flutter of canvas, the long craft swung away and passed into the greyness.

. . . .

Again the two men stood looking at each other as men will who are too amazed for words. And as though ashamed also, to some degree, they walked forward and returned to the capstan-head.

The pilot was the first to speak. "That beats all," he decided.

He picked up the tray and two glasses, swept the pieces from the brass and walked towards the cabin entrance. The captain followed, carrying the bottles. They looked like a pair of insane conspirators.

"No—not much change to be got out of that," King acquiesced.

"Sounds as if he'd gone balmy since I saw him last, sir . . . and I've known him from a boy. Curious!"

They entered the cabin and sat *vis-à-vis*.

"Well, but what do you make of it generally?" King asked.

"Sir, I don't know what to make of it, an' that's the truth. It sounds daft; but I know that last time the ship came in after dumping half her crew . . . her skipper didn't bring her in. That's certain, true; but how much or how little of the rest is true—I'm not able to say."

"Good. Then I'm going to turn in. Give the mate orders to call me if the wind rises, and if there's any sign of a shift, and in any case at five o'clock." He rose, carrying the bottles. "If you want anything let me know. If there's a

clear, call me. Crew or no crew, drunk or sober, I get away as soon as I can. But say nothing about all this palaver to any one. I don't want the ship about my ears now I'm in her. It's enough that I know."

"But you believe what you've heard, sir . . . you be——"

"Some I believe. The rest I don't."

"And—and you'll sail her, cap'n?"

"Why—what would you have me do . . . desert?"

"Oh! but there's ways of . . ."

"Nonsense. I have signed on and signed on my crew. If I refused to sail her they could put me in jail, exactly as if I were before the mast. And," he added, a twinkle appearing, "where would I get another ship? What owner would look at my papers?"

"True, true. I'm with you there, sir; but surely there's some . . . some way out. See a lawyer . . . get advice . . ." The pilot suddenly stammered in his speech, halted, looking up.

"Advice! From lawyers?" King smiled. "I have no use for it. As far as I see it, I'm mounted on the tiger and will . . . have to stick on."

"Joking!" The pilot lifted his beard as he leaned out, searching this man's heart. "God! I wouldn't have thought it."

"If it is what I suspect, and what you seem to

suspect, pilot," King urged, "how am I to dismount?"

And again that man of slow wit stared, reiterating his impression of the skipper's mentality—"Joking, sir!" He shook his head over this. "Joking—no, I wouldn't believe it. For all that, sir—while we're hot wi' it, let me wish you luck, cap'n . . . for on my soul you deserve it!" the pilot quavered.

And with that he climbed the companion stairs and went on deck. Here he walked a while, then sat on the corner of the rabbit hutch, lighted his pipe and noted the loom of the South Sand Head gradually becoming less misty.

A scuffle in the run beneath him made him stir. He heard a squeal, looked closer and saw baby rabbits squirming in the grip of their mother as she fussed over them.

"Motherhood!" he said and relighted his pipe. "Lord be good to us . . . a night like this . . . an' no grub in the hutch!"

He decided to remind the skipper of this when he came on deck after his sleep.

. . . .

Beyond, the lights in houses facing the sea went out one by one.

Deal had gone to sleep; but the ships in the offing were beginning to awake when King came up to face what stood beside him. He said, in answer to the pilot's salutation:

"They seem to have left another sort of stock

on board—rats, by the sound of it. I couldn't sleep for the brutes."

"That's luck!" the pilot proclaimed. "You're safe as houses where there's rats . . . in spite of the tiger."

"Better get her hove short, pilot," King returned. "It's thinning."

## III

The *Tiger* was tumbling along before stiff north-east trades when the first hint of this matter and the mode of its attack fell upon her, catching her so little expectant of a blow, that those touched scarcely understood what stood over them.

With the captain, however, this was not so. The possibility had always been present. It was a concomitant of his command ; a background, hazy and indefinite to keep him at full stretch, yet rather farther away than might have been expected by people unconversant with the sea and its lure. The necessity a commander has for overcoming any lapse in the direction of sentimentalism or self-analysis of any kind is immediate and abiding. He may form pictures in his mind, but they must not disturb his sleep. Some callings demand the type of mentality we term introspective ; but it is a nerve-racking business at best, and among sailors and soldiers the less we have of it the better for those under their command. The man who can imagine what would happen when he is running before a gale and a sea so high that at any moment his ship may broach-to, were better off the poop than on it ; better for his own peace

and for the safety of those who obey his orders if he remain inert in his cabin.

When they made sail from the Downs with only half a crew fit to respond to his call, Captain King was playing bowls with the devil ; but they escaped the consequences, perhaps because the devil was inattentive, and found a leading wind down Channel and by degrees obtained a full crew. The men in some cases grumbled and talked fight when they recovered. They said they had been shanghaied and had not signed articles, but became less outspoken under King's judicious management. They were off the Start at the time and bowling away with a fine breeze under all sail. The anguish of beating down Channel was not for them. It was behind them, and King at leisure to go the rounds, look to their comfort and the cleanliness of their cabins.

The mate, a spare, dark-haired, sharp-featured person, considered this a usurpation of his prerogatives. He had figured out work for the watches and wanted a free hand ; but King, without saying why, ordered a general disinfection of all living quarters at once. He announced simply that he required cleanliness. Soap and soda, brushes and scrapers, limewash and the fumes of burning sulphur became the aim and substance of all their work. It is easy to gauge how the talk ran on a windjammer bound south. The skipper, men considered, would do well in

one of the new-fangled billets as an inspector of nuisances, which were being given out all over the place at home. He should swallow the anchor and put in his papers. They'd give him a job flyin'. . . . But King went his way unruffled, carrying his burden and theirs. Then, when the fumigation satisfied him, he set his world agape by ordering the carpenter to build a partition across the sailroom and fit a couple of bunks in the section he had filched from the sailmaker's domain. "What for?" "What in the Lord's name for?" The men wondered, grumbled and said he was daft. He had a bee. He was a person endowed with the nose of a setter . . . but they spoke so many languages that no great headway in mutiny could be made. The sailroom for a time was like the tower of Babel, a place of halting metaphors, designed, as it seemed, by the old man to mix them.

To a certain extent even his officers felt aggrieved; but they were so busy explaining in Levanter and other Mediterranean tongues what was required that they had no time to nurse it. Again, these two were English. The folk they commanded Dagoes. Two officers of a linguistically inept race struggling to direct foreigners, and doing it, in matters which required new text-books, new aphorisms, if they were to be found. Luckily the weather was fine, the wind fair, in spite of that legend of the tiger which lay over them as they moved.

So they drew down to the place of calms and light winds ; flinging along in the track of bonito and flying fish under a sky so blue and glowing, so softly glazed and shaded, that trouble *qua* trouble seemed remote.

It was then that Everitt, the mate and second in command, came aft and stood looking at the star-strung wake as he said : " One of my watch, sir, G. Hanados, is off duty since eight bells," without appreciating the burden of his words.

Captain King glanced up at the tone. Eight bells meant 4 a.m. ; it was now nearer eight o'clock. " Is he sick ? " he asked.

" So he says."

" Any pain ? "

" Headache, sir. Can't sleep, and seems a bit stupid in his talk."

" Hum." The captain paused to light his pipe, then said : " Look after her. I will go down and see him."

He was absent some time. When he returned it was obvious he was anxious. His eyes held a look the mate did not know ; but he smoked. That was a good sign.

Presently he halted midway on a walk towards the break of the poop. The chief joined him.

" He is not malingering," said King, " and he is delirious. I don't like what I saw. . . . I suppose you haven't come across it before ? "

The mate looked puzzled, but said : " No, not to my knowledge."

"Well—it has to be faced," King decided as they continued to walk. "Coming into the hot weather, too! Couldn't be worse."

Again they walked in silence up and down in the fresh morning light, the sun throwing long shadows as they moved; the sea swelling and breaking in a clarity so brilliant, the wake seemed to stretch like a path drawn through diamonds scintillating in the sun. It seemed to belie the possibility of storm; to mock at the voice of the croaker; to point to life and hope and generous leave in those lands which presently would welcome the voyagers. Like the white clouds of the trades, so this thing would pass, leaving no trace on the splendid sea that bore them.

Then came the shuffle of feet on the main deck, and the two halted to look down on a procession, Lang controlling it, of four men carrying in an extempore stretcher, one who lurched and rolled, his head inert.

The mate was about to break away and take charge, but the commander held him.

"Wait. We shall have to consider what we must do. I shall have to take you into my confidence," he said jerkily. "I might have done so earlier . . . but I hoped against hope. It doesn't do to talk of this kind of thing"—he pointed to the group vanishing in the sailroom—"when men are cut off—as we are. Cut off . . . just thrown together without help, to face what comes. Well—it's a thing we can do . . . by

the way, I suppose you all thought I had a bee in my bonnet when we were in Channel, eh? I wish that were a solution. . . . Gad! I would give my pay if it were. . . . Of course, I am talking from what we may call knowledge now. At first it was surmise. Now I am less sure. . . . The trouble about it was that when I first heard a whisper which put me in touch with what might be before us we had all signed on, and if we had refused to take the ship to sea would have had to go to prison. . . . And, this is the point, we might none of us have been infected—so no one would have died in prison; but when we came out we would have starved. You see that? Literally and effectually starved for saving our lives! Amazing to think of *now*. . . . Good God! Amazing . . . yet how would they know? Couldn't, of course . . .

"Look here, Everitt, if we could get in anywhere to-morrow or the day after, I would run for it without qualms. I would risk being thrown out of my command; but there's no chance. We are about three hundred miles south of the De Verdes and can't get back in the teeth of the trades in less than a month; we are fifteen hundred from Pernambuco and two thousand five hundred from Rio. I have no charts for Pernambuco, and I don't care about running for it. Too many reefs about the coast there . . . so we are left with Rio—and it may take us a month to get there. . . . All mañana people,

too, when we do. Worse! The over-seas brand!

"Mind! I am taking the worst view of this business; but I have my data. I may be wrong. My books don't give me much help, and neither you nor I have studied medicine. . . . That's why I am keen on getting somewhere where there's a hospital and doctors. . . . Natural, isn't it?"

He broke off abruptly, crossed to leeward and looked down at the door which led to the sail-room; looked overside at the ports and came back.

"Of course, there's Fernando Noronha, about a thousand miles off—probably in the doldrums always, and it's a convict settlement. . . . Not much good trying that! No. It looks like Rio—a month's time! Good God!" He crossed up and down by the rabbit run, looked at the babies gambolling about and again approached the mate.

"Sit down," he said, "and fill your pipe. Tobacco is a good antidote. . . . We have to get to the bottom of this business, and I don't want the man at the wheel to hear what we say. . . ." He lowered his voice as they moved together to a seat on the hutch. "You have heard of the Black-death of the fourteenth century, I suppose?"

Everitt looked up to scan the troubled features of this man; his pipe poised, stationary. He

nodded in spite of that. "Yes—I've heard of it . . . Good God!"

He did not smoke. His heart thumped hard at his ribs and for a moment ceased. He drew breath with difficulty. He wanted to shout, to cry out that he was unready . . . then with a flush which ran through him to the tips of his fingers he struck a match and again pulled at his pipe. He had made his reading, and in spite of his scare he thought he saw where the bee lodged.

"Sit down," said his commander. "We must thrash this out—you and I. If it is what I suppose, we are up a tree. In twenty-four or thirty-six hours I shall be able to judge better. . . . I saw something of it in India . . ."

The mate watched. The bee theory seemed to be fading. The man looked eminently sane.

"But before I go into that," said the voice of Captain King, "I want you to know what set me on the track of it. If I had not heard those men talking . . . What men? Well, the pilot and a boatman who came off while we were lying in the Downs. You were on the poop part of the time . . . you must have had an inkling—No? You astonish me."

The mother rabbit lifted on her haunches and nosed the captain's fingers as he rested with one hand on the edge of the hutch. He smoothed her head, played with her ears, talking of what happened when they were windbound off Deal. He did not seem aware that the rabbit was angling

with kittenish grace to remind him that her trough was empty.

"It appears this thing," they had already so docketed it in their minds, "was first noticed after a voyage to Kinchau, a town in Manchuria, at the head of the gulf of Lian Lung, which is at the head of Hwang Hai or the Yellow Sea. . . . Cargo of tea and pelts—drink and dress for the ladies at home. . . . What pelts? Marmot, no doubt. . . . Are you married? No. Then keep single. A sailor is too much in contact with—well, this thing, for instance, to think of marriage. It isn't fair on the woman . . ."

The bee finally vanished in the mate's mind in spite of the irrelevance of his skipper.

"Think it out, Everitt," he heard again, jamming it home. "And connect the facts of that voyage with those of the second—to Rosario, where we are bound to-day, for some inscrutable purpose. . . . If we aren't riding the tiger tell me who is . . ."

The mate stared. He had not the remotest knowledge of any tiger but the ship he was on. The skipper seemed to be wandering—yet he hammered home his views—

"Consider what I've told you. The crew dying like flies on both these voyages. Nothing to show why. No record kept. God knows I've searched . . . nothing, as I'm a living man, to guide those who came after. No fumigation in port as likely as not . . . so I began by putting

you all on edge with soogee-moogee. What was I to do? Turning back wouldn't have saved *us*. If there is any truth in the story, we were infected then! Nothing on God's earth can stay that . . ."

"How is the infection carried, sir?" the mate questioned as the argument told.

"I don't think any one knows."

"Ah! that makes it difficult for us . . ."

"Yes . . . and our stock of disinfectants is small." He rose and glanced at the clock, calm in spite of his burden, and added: "Well, go down and take the time for me. We must get her fixed off if it's the last thing we do . . ."

He brought out his sextant and standing near the skylight took a series of three observations, calling "Time!" as he always called it, and giving the angle with the same snap. The men must be cajoled, kept from thinking. They would be obliged to go in for sports, if this went on. That was the dominant note which emerged from their talk. Sport. And the men who would have to be instructed in it were Dagoes!

Breakfast cheered them on this the first day of their trial, in spite of the fact that at eight bells the patient was definitely worse; "off his head" as they termed it, looking solemnly one at the other. The coffee was good, the haddock and toast excellent, marmalade and butter, all of the best at the captain's table. The old man saw to that, and his purse suffered; but in the fo'c'sle was another story. Men who make a pier-head jump or are

carried like sacks of potatoes up the gangway do not as a rule supplement the stores on which they must exist.

A new vein appeared with the officers' exit from breakfast. It had been decided that this matter must be kept from the crew—altogether, if possible ; but certainly now. If talking began there was no saying where it would end. To explain to a crew of mixed nationalities that you are confronted by a deadly sickness, that you are at least a month's sail from the only port you can make, and that you have no means of fighting it, is to draw the knife on mutiny. With an English ship's company the danger would be great, with Dagoes, suicide.

Instead a story was put in circulation that the old man had a lot more stores than they could possibly get through in the cabin, and he proposed to make certain additions to the scale for which they had signed. His object was to try to raise the men's stamina and so enable them to help him keep the disease at arm's length. Heroic measures sometimes make heroes of plain men ; but here were not even plain men. " Ringlets from the streets of Whitechapel," Sails termed them, and he should know, seeing he was a Londoner born. They very soon had an eye on the steward, as a matter of fact, to see there was no " nigglé-gouging " going on, as one termed it, when he was weighing out their stores.

Meanwhile the patient rapidly became worse.

All his symptoms pointed to plague, which begins with headache and ends in death. If he suffered no one knew. He was unconscious or delirious from the end of the first day until he died.

The men were kept apart. The two officers and Sails, working in the room with sulphur fumes rising to choke them, sewed him in canvas and carried him out for burial. Then at noon on the third day the foreyard was run up and the ship brought to the wind while the service was read and the body tilted into the sea.

. . . .

The breeze had decreased on that third day ; but with the sun still well south of the ship, King was encouraged to hope the trades would carry them across the line. But there was no movement of the clouds. The sky had become choked; the sultriness increased, and on the following day two of the mate's watch went down in the recognised way . . . headache, lassitude, pain, sickness, delirium. So they lay on the second day awaiting the end. They did not know the end approached. They remained twisting, babbling, shouting, grinning—mere incoherences, no longer even requiring food ; restlessly alert for the moment which, at sea, bespeaks a halted ship and a tilted plank.

The plank was hardly replaced now when those who remained of the port watch began to grumble ; Sails and the bo'sun their audience.

They did not understand zese too mouch quick burials . . . Why had zese men die? When? Sapristi! zey understood less zan nussing of what assailed them; less than the dust of what was said in reply.

They put on their caps and went forward, grumbling.

Those who were still alive of the port watch were seen that night rigging a tent on the fo'c'sle head, and carrying their gear to stow it in lockers beneath it.

At length it seemed their intelligence had grasped the essential fact of what pressed on them. Something latent in the ship which fumigation had not touched . . . something especially in the fo'c'sle inhabited by the port watch. The mate's watch . . . a man, carrajo! who talked not one word.

## IV

The officers aimed more openly now to raise the stamina of those who remained. It was seen that they had become suspicious, even morose in their bearing. Little ebullitions born of fear came before those who controlled the watches. Men mouched instead of swinging along in answer to a call. Orders found them mute of response. They no longer sang on the halliards or became stridulent on the braces, but clustered in groups when the thing was done and endlessly jabbered.

The captain prescribed more food, better cooking and cleanliness. In the cabin meals were possible only when supplemented at the old man's expense. The crew were served by a regulation known as "Accordin' to the Act" . . . "Lime juice an' vinegar thrown in." Only the dregs of stores came on board ship in the heyday of that transcendent Victorian period. Peculation, robbery and cheeseparing all had a hand in the game. There was a squeeze system, similar in character to that known as the mandarin squeeze, through which all Jack's stores filtered. Some of the stuff was so damnable in spite of the Act and the thunder of those who knew that it was unfit for

the pig trough. Condemned stores, Army and Navy discardings, mouldy pork, junk from which men carved models, all were there to be weighed out ; but now King ordered stimulants instead of lime juice ; flour for " soft tack " instead of weavily biscuits ; beans, potatoes, preserved apples, soup and bully—all from his own stores as long as they should last, in the hope of staving off disease.

Tasty dishes, too, were the order of the day to a cook and steward accustomed to serve the prevailing beastliness to men who worked and watched. Calashee watch was set in order to ease the strain. Inspection, a new regulation at which men stared ; at certain hours, exercise. Porridge and condensed milk were prepared for breakfast. No more cracker-hash or pease-pudding. Everything to one end. A search for proteids in days before proteins were invented . . . revolution, in fact, which soon was resented.

The cabins and sailroom aft smelled of sulphur, the fo'c'sles of paint and tar. Even the deck-house, where the afterguard lived, was not spared the ordeal of scrapers, soogee-moogee and a searing iron which was passed, while men stared, over all crevasses in bunks and bunk-boards. All to no purpose except, perhaps, to lengthen the terrible ordeal and make the thing, whatever it was, or wherever it lurked, more sinister and menacing in its approach.

Thus they came on the tenth day of their trial

abreast St. Paul's Rock, a bare, sun-scorched pinnacle some eighty miles north of the equator. Birds rose about it as they sagged past, sails slamming and jingling with the old music of blocks and cliphooks ; pointing to all who could read, their creeping progress in a world where no breeze stirred. As the rock was left astern the light airs and sultriness of the doldrums wrapped them in a cloak and kept them sweating. Sometimes it rained as though a sluice had been drawn in heaven ; then they plugged scuppers and went nakedly to bathe and wash clothes. Sometimes a little breath came in from the north, sometimes from the south ; from every quarter in turn, and sometimes none at all.

Then one day as they crept past Fernando Noronha, lying far, far off in the west, a breeze swept up from the land and presently drove them quaking and gathering in sail through black darkness towards a group of water-spouts, which revolved to break them, sinister, roaring at the base like a Niagara. But they escaped ; the clouds came down to meet ascending spirals and whisked them off, crooked as the trees and paths of witchcraft, to join the leeward cauldron.

There followed a night when it blew half a gale, icily, as though they touched the pole, when sail was reduced, the mainsail snugged, and little spirit fires crept about the yards and came down the backstays to keep them company. Thunder crashed as they climbed to furl sail. Afar off,

lightning glimmered upon a molten horizon, flaming for an instant amidst night. They climbed through a deluge which poured upon them as from a spout ; climbed choked and blinded, while, twinkling and lolloping on unseen yardarms, the corposant showed its power over the souls of dead sailormen.

The men damned or made the sign of the Cross as they crept past, certain now of a pursuant fate. They stared one at the other, questioning if this were so. For days no man of them had fallen sick. It had appeared that they were immune—but now ! Basta ! At all hazards the gale would blow away contagion. . . . The gale ! Christo ! and to-morrow it may be calm. Down on deck ! Ssst ! Let's hear from you with your Calm . . .

They were wrong. In two hours it was calm, the moon unveiled, the stars shining, the sails reset and slamming—as though never again would they be assailed by the music of a gale which could cleanse.

Daylight found them sitting upon the spars, wet to the eyes, the calm triumphant—oily ; the sea glass, upon which crawled slugs and curious horned things from the depths, clouds close down upon the horizon, luminous in patches ; here and there a bird, but no sail ; Sargasso weed trailing, but no steamship to give them hope and shake them from the depths.

At ten o'clock they plugged scuppers and prayed for rain ; but no rain fell. Only the sun

poured upon them, its rays and the stark magic of the heavens showed a white-hot disc swimming high upon an uncurtained sky, through which came small aerial spiders sailing on a thread, passing to seaward, passing unbroken, undisturbed. . . . Then noon, and one suffering as with ague beneath an awning rigged on the fo'c'sle-head. At four he still was there, a pannikin of water beside him, his shipmates confident that if they carried him aft, those who controlled the cabin would slay him. It had come to that . . . yet at eight o'clock the man was rolling, and those who watched more scared than had seemed possible at four.

This thing which had no name, which was but a passport for death, assailed them, apparently, whether the cabin was implicated or not. It sprang upon them from nowhere ; for no cause ; without sound or visible token of its approach ; leaving no very great scar, no wound to speak of . . . what was it ? The question arrived in varying tones, varying languages . . . was it of God or of hell ?

The ship was accursed ; that they swore with a shaking of fists and malditos. The officers, the cabin as they put it, went free. Why ! Nothing touch ze *sacré* after end of this *Tiger* . . . not even ze steward ! Why was that ? It was plain. The old man knew what he was about . . . so did the mates ! Trust them for that. They knew what it was that preyed upon them . . . *knew !*

Why, for instance, was he feeding them with his most damnable stores—stores which no Act ordained? What was more likely than that they were stores which would have to be thrown overboard or fed to the rabbits aft, if they did not eat them! And meanwhile he was saving the stores that were legitimately theirs! Perhaps he had doctored the food and was experimenting on his crew. It had been done. God! that, too, was possible. Were they the kind of fools to permit this to go on?

In any case, whether he was playing with them or not, he was feathering his nest. . . . Oh! he knew. He knew. . . . And if he knew he was to blame. Some one had heard that he had difficulty in finding a crew! Remember? And they—how did they arrive—on their feet or on the backs of those who had sold them?

Then, quite suddenly, one of those who gesticulated discovered that perhaps this thing in some subtle fashion was infectious, and thundered a warning to stand back, to keep away. That impressed them. It was a new thought. It left them at leisure to observe with alarmed faculties the man twisting there on the deck where they would sleep, and they grabbed at the canvas on which he lay.

"Aft! Aft to the cabin! Aft, that he may be seen . . ."

A panic seized them. They were like sheep in a pen which a wolf has leaped. One by one he

would take them by the throat and they would die. . . . " Aft ! Aft to the cabin ! No touch ! Carry. . . . So ! "

They arrived savage before the break of the poop, and stood under that scroll which spoke of a tiger, unknowing either that it threatened, or prayed or cajoled, or had power to compel obedience.

The mate looked down, drawn by the noise they made, and asked what was wrong. A Dutchman replied. He pointed to their burden, saying another man was sick. They had brought him for the cabin to treat. If he died, they would know why . . . also they would require boats, provisions, and the course to that island they passed. That was all they could think of at the moment ; they must think it all out . . . anything else could be requisitioned if the man died.

King heard, as well as those who were on watch, and came to interview them. " So—you would desert us . . . is that it ? " he asked.

" No good for stay," a Dago shook back in his face, " se'coursa stay . . . die allee, same dog."

" But you may die in the boats if I give them."

" Die 'ere, *ciertimente* . . . in ze boat, no se." He lifted shoulders—perhaps.

" Very well. Get for'ud. In the morning I will tell you what I will do . . ."

They moved away obedient. One of the afterguard opened the hospital. Others picked up the man and carried him in. Afterwards King

returned to his cabin and entered up the notes he had taken. Notes which were useless except as evidence—if it ever came to that. Well, he had taken them. He added one more detail : " In this case," he wrote, " as far as I can judge without a stethoscope, there appears to be lung trouble also."

The thing struck blindly according to Lang. It was a sort of lottery in which no dice were thrown ; chance . . . something you could not gauge. Twelve hours ago this lad was laughing, jolly, ready for a scuffle or to fish from the flying-boom end. Now he was dying. Everitt acquiesced. Without doubt others would follow.

King, meanwhile, was face to face with the riddle of prevention, the riddle he must read, or prepare to follow those who had already succumbed . . . the riddle of the Sphinx who set impossible tasks for her children to solve, and would punish with death if they were unable to solve them.

He climbed presently to the poop and walked with the mate. It was cooler now the sun was gone. They could go capless, their white tunics open at the neck. They could think other thoughts as they read the opal night ; speculate on that cluster of stars in the Milky Way, on *Betelgeuse*, that so-called star in *Orion* which they often " took" for latitude, with its two hundred million mile diameter to prick the distance as shown in the

stellar galaxy . . . on a score of topics which come to seamen when on watch, all more or less entrancing.

They did none of these things. A bo'sun * went screaming past, and King at once acclaimed it as a portent : " Wind coming, Everitt. That's infallible here."

" We want it, sir. Somehow I should be thankful for any kind of break in this monotonous . . ." he looked about, searching for a word, " ghastliness. I—as a matter of fact, I had a queer sort of dream last night and can't shake it off. . . . I thought I was standing beside the gangway there and something came over to where I was. A yellow-brown striped beast of a kind. It came close up to me and stood looking at me, a wide grin on its face . . . not dangerous, just sly—and it said : ' Get up and ride . . . it's your turn.'

" And as I stared at the thing it melted away, as it seemed, in a flame—eyes, paws, tail—all aflame. . . . That tiger story you were telling me, sir, no doubt . . . or——" he coughed shamedly, " the pickles I had with my supper. . . ."

King walked on without speaking. He was searching out what impression all this had made on his companion. What was his attitude ? Then he said, irrelevantly, it appeared :

" I thought we had got the better of it. We seemed to have scotched it, and now we have this new case. . . . Courage, my friend. Courage.

* A white sea-bird with a tail like a marlinspike.

. . . In a week we shall be well on our way to Rio and we shall have forgotten the tiger."

But he was wrong.

The trades came in during the night and they began at once to reel off knots. A squall heralded their advent ; steadied the wet sails and started the kettle-drum patter of reef-points high up where the wind hummed and the arch of heaven was blurred with rain.

This occurred in the mid-watch, the mate in charge, moving up and down the long poop with that queer picture of a yellow-brown beast fixed in his brain. It persisted in spite of the signals made that the trades were upon them and all other matters just bagatelle. Already he had trimmed sail for a wind abeam. Then the squall leaped out—south-east.

" Lee fore brace ! "

An order this from an officer who screened his eyes and leaned forward, searching the night out there in the wind's eye where something moved across to leeward. Something miraculously striped which melted away in the green glow, shining where the starboard light and the spin-drift met above the screen. He crept down two steps of the ladder leading to the main deck, deciding he must find out what was happening . . . then sat and failed to move at all.

" Lee fore brace, there, the watch ! Sharp her up, my sons."

The bo'sun's voice came to him as he sat there

fiddling with the pictures which bothered him ; then swiftly, silence and tense mental activity . . . mist. Perhaps, at this, he dozed.

The bo'sun found him there when he came aft to report that sail was trimmed. He stood beside him on the step, speaking the old formula ; but the mate failed to reply. His head sank. He seemed dazed. His eyes were wide open, fixed, scared ; he seemed in the act of speech. The bo'sun stooped over him, considering his attitude. He picked him up, taking him by the armpits, and laid him across the rabbit hutch. He decided to call the second mate, and when he returned with him the two men saw that the mate's hand had slipped and hung within the " run," and the rabbits were skittering past it.

They could not understand him when he tried to speak. His speech was thick. He himself looked " like death." Lang went into the cabin and brought the captain to see him. He, too, stooped over the officer, asked questions, felt his pulse, his forehead, going through the old and inadequate search for symptoms to which he was condemned.

" Take him below," he said at length. " If he isn't better in the morning, it looks like another case for the hospital. . . ."

He felt the banality of this reply—yet he could give no other. As captain he must speak ; but he dared not give rein to his thoughts. True, he did not *know*. Nor had he the means of knowing.

He had neither the instruments to attempt diagnosis nor the drugs, nor the training to make use of either. He could in effect just pray that the trades had set in at last and keep the yards trimmed. That was all he could do. Rio, when he reached it, would alter everything. He pinned his faith and his prayers on reaching it speedily.

. . . .

He walked aft, strong still, one of the least imaginative of men, and stood looking up. The royals were in their gear, the lighter stay-sails hauled down, the main-sail with weather clue lifted. The wind appeared steady now the squall was past. He glanced at the compass and saw they were heading south by west. It sounded like the trades ! He called out, ordering them to heave the log : " Must keep the devil out of their minds," he decided. And to the officer and two boys who presently stood to leeward with reel and glass, he said : " I believe we have them this time," and crossed to windward.

Lang gathered a coil of line in his hand and flung it to leeward. The reel began to spin. There came an order, " Turn ! " sharply given, and the boy's reply. The line whizzed now, the reel held high to give it freedom. The sea was smooth, the night black, the water full of dim fires which slid alongside and disappeared in the miracle of their ship's wake. Again came a voice, " Stop ! " very sharply, as though the world and the ship's

presence in that humming blackness depended on instant acknowledgment. Then far over the stern a line of phosphorescence appeared, leaping at the terminal with the agility of a newly hooked fish.

Lang crossed to windward and reported: "Nine and a half knots, sir."

"Thank you. I thought she was doing well. If these are the trades we shall be in Rio on Thursday—three days! Set the royals and board the main tack; make fast the light stay-s'ls, then give her the gaff-top-s'l."

He walked up and down noting the course for a time. She did not break off. The wind seemed to have weight in it; the trade-wind ballast, as he termed it. The night was clearer, too; stars were beginning to appear, and seas smacking her bow in a fashion that made him glad. Spray flew over the decks forward with the note of hurled shot; the after scuppers were beginning to gurgle and throw a gush of water up the sloping decks as she heeled to the breeze. He walked on air; intent on time—three days! What was that? Child's play.

He decided, squaring his shoulders, that if the wind held he would have but little difficulty with the crew. They would think twice, thrice, about taking to the boats when they saw the ship's speed and knew how soon they would be in Rio. That little ebullition of theirs would pass. After all, when you consider it, what did these poor devils know beyond the very patent fact that they were

dying ? If the captain walked in darkness, how much blacker must be the night in which they groped ! Sailors go to sea prepared to obey orders in a way utterly incomprehensible and undreamed of by landsmen. A skipper was a sublimated being, half crank, half god, who knew all about everything and would knock spots off the man who questioned it. These things are acknowledged by the simple crews in a way which must have puzzled Ruskin, if he had taken the trouble to examine them.

Yet King walked up and down, harassed and oppressed by his lack of knowledge. His acumen was at fault. The mate's sudden collapse had driven it home. Could there be anything in this tiger theory ? . . . And if there were, why should it touch Everitt ? . . . What had Everitt *done ?* If the crew could have read that, what might not have happened !

" I suppose," he came to meet Lang with the words, " it *is* the same thing again ? It can be nothing else . . . we seem to pass it from one to another like cholera. Have you ever come across anything like it ? "

" Never, sir. Luckily, perhaps, for me, I have been in the Australian service all my time. You don't get these filthy troubles in the forties. Gales, yes ; but we can handle them."

" What are they saying for'ard ? "

" A bit staggered, sir, I think, by the chief going down."

"Thought we were immune, I suppose," he smiled, thinking of his doubts just now, "or that it would differentiate against the after-guard . . . sailor-like!"

"It looks as if they did, sir."

"Good. When we get to Rio I will see they have an opportunity to run. We'll make a clean sweep of it somehow, and see if we can't change our luck. You believe in luck, I know. . . ." He glanced to windward. "Squall coming. I'll get below." He waited for no answer. "Call me at eight bells, or if it is necessary at any time."

Lang crossed the deck to face that squall. He put on his oilskin, calling to the watch as he did so: "Stand by royal and t'gallant-halliards, there, fore and aft!"

As he buttoned his coat, the *Tiger* lay down to it as she had not done since they left Channel.

"Watch your luff!" he said again, and moved towards the mizzen rigging. Again, more definitely: "Luff! Go gently with her . . . Small helm!"

She sneezed through it, going on a bee-line for Rio, her sides lighted by flame.

## V

At sunrise on Friday, when the coast line about Rio was in sight, the wind was failing. At nine o'clock, when they came up from breakfast, the ship slipped along, driven alone by the flap of her sails as she lurched upon the swell. Blue sea, blue sky, her picture shadowed beside her; birds whirling and settling down to watch her pass; so she crept onward, hope in the hearts of her crew, King triumphant, and came to somnolence before that wonderful panorama of mountain and woodland, where a town lay hid which would cure them.

Calm, silence and noon-day haze.

King stood on the poop, the colours with which presently they would talk strewn about in hoists. He noted the failing breeze; the hot sun which had killed it. They were factors in this game he was playing with death. Who would win? Would it be stalemate? He stared to windward, seeking an answer to his riddle.

The mate was dead. Last night they buried him as they drew in to the land about Cape Frio. Two days earlier another victim passed from the *Tiger's* port watch and was buried in the silence

of night, far out where the trades boomed, and spray wetted the leech of the foresail and jibs with every dive. And now, again, the hospital held its quota of patients—three of them: the bo'sun, and two boys from the deck-house, aft. As the *Tiger* had come to be known as the *Yellow Angel*, so that portion of the sailroom which had been turned into a hospital came to be known as the dead-house. It was the cabin in which you placed those who presently would die. There were no drugs, no nursing, no treatment beyond the horrible fumes of sulphur which, thank God, were at last failing. When a patient entered, if he had any comprehension at all, he knew that presently he would die. When he was dead, men would enter and carry him out and throw him into the sea. There was no escape. He had entered a blind alley into which the sick may legitimately crawl and die unseen. . . .

And all through that period, while men watched and prayed for their shipmates, the *Tiger* sped over seas brilliant and vivifying, bending to the sweeping trade wind beneath heavens of the bluest, across which sped white clouds from the south, sailing up steadily to meet other cloud shapes in the equatorial doldrums. The ship bent down under her towering spread as though she knew her beauty. A beautiful woman flirting her fan over the ashes of her dead.

And now she had accomplished her task. The land lay aboard; a bay somewhere hid by that

towering rock called Corcovado, and an island at its feet with guns and garrison to defend the bay. A drowsy breeze touched the sails, driving her nearer. At her masthead hung the flag they called the Yellow Angel. So slowly they drove, the afternoon was nearly spent before those who were custodians of the ship got in touch with those on the fort. They spoke presently with flags, for the era of semaphore and wireless was not yet. They explained in answer to the brusque challenge—" B. D. ? "—hoisted on a yard beside the green Brazilian ensign, that the ship's name was *Tiger*. Then went on to say she was from London for Rosario ; forty-five days out and had sickness on board, for which a doctor was urgently required. . . .

All this took long to spell, long to read, for the flags hung like wisps of coloured bunting for lack of wind. Then at length came a question even more brusque :

" What sickness ? "

And from the *Tiger* the compromising reply : " It is not known. Six have died, others are sick, hence the necessity for a doctor and medicines."

The ship moved very slowly in towards the harbour entrance while this talk passed. Then a flag signal went up at the fort which checked that :

" Heave to ! " it said, and after a pause, " If you approach nearer we shall fire. Meanwhile we consult headquarters."

"Meanwhile," King snapped back, "we go on dying. For God's sake send quickly!"

And from the fort:

"As I have said, I consult headquarters. Haul off!"

It was as though one said trumpet-wise, "Get to hell. We have our own sick to remember."

The ship lay adrowse on the lazy sea considering this. Her courses were lifted, her main yard aback, her head trailing away to the south-east. Rio seemed farther off than on that night when the mate saw the brown striped beast, which smiled upon him and bid him mount.

The sun dipped behind hills which fenced in the town, and a sensible coolness was acknowledged by all who had borne the flame of day. One of the two boys who lay within the screened-off hospital felt the change and rattled his way home, grinning at what he saw. The sky outside flared over the sea and lighted new depths within the bay. It was blood-red, tinged with gold; the heavens shaded away into amber, green, and the purple night. Cirri swept up from above the mountains, torch-like cloudlets glowed and passed; the sea shivered and was dark . . . the circle swept.

Shapes which were mountains became lighted, stirred from sleep by lamps which marked in tiers and tiers the city's altitudes. Gleams from ships resting at anchor came twinkling down the bay as for a *festa*.

Then, when a velvet peace lay over sea and land, a gunboat steamed past the fort and dropped down to talk with *Tiger*.

King, marching the poop alert and miserable, saw her coming, and a flick of hope dawned. "At last! My God, at last!" He turned to Lang. "I began to fear they were not coming. You can never tell what this breed will do . . . tell you to go to hell, like as not."

The gunboat rounded-to safely, up-wind of them. The flurry of her screw going astern told King that his diagnosis, at least, was premature.

"Rather far off for talk," he said, commenting on this. "Perhaps he will send a boat, though." Hope flamed again there.

They waited for it. It did not appear. Instead, when the propeller was still and the race silent, a voice hailed through a speaking trumpet:

"You spick Portuguese, Senhor Capitan?"

"No, sir."

"Eenglis?"

"Yes."

"Goodt—then I try spick wot I can. Wot make your crew-mans to die?"

"We do not know. Some kind of fever."

"Fever. . . . wot fever?"

"I do not know."

"'Ow long man seek before ee die?"

"Three to four days. Another died since I spoke the fort this morning."

"Yet anuzzer?"

"Yes."

"Well—I am sairow . . . but I 'av order to give zat you mous go away queek . . . go Rosario. Eet eis no possible do anysings 'ere. . . ."

"But I want a doctor and medicine! Surely you can give me some help. . . . I am without medicine of any kind and I do not know how to treat the people when they become sick."

"Vair sairow, senhor, but I can giff you onlie my order. Go avay to Rosario. Go queek as you can. Eef you no go I aff order to seenk you at onze."

"To sink us? You mean you will fire on us—an unarmed ship with sick men on board—you mean that?"

"I aff my order. I aff nottings to spick, onlie zat."

"And I, Senhor Commandant, have given an order, also. My men are hoisting the English flag. If you sink us there will be trouble. I should advise restraint. There is no wind. It is calm. I could not in consequence obey your order if I would. If your Government is afraid we shall bring infection to you," he spoke very slowly and clearly, "you had better persuade them to send out a tug. It will be less costly than the other business, if you think it out. . . ."

"A tugboat? O yes! I persuadir zem to send to you zat. . . ."

"Persuade them also to find a doctor. Say that I beg, supplicate, for a doctor and for medi-

cine . . . otherwise what chance have I of getting to Rosario or anywhere? You understand that we are dying one after the other, and that if we have no help all will die. All! Let your Government isolate us in a little bay, outside if you will; but for God's sake persuade them to send out a man who will take charge of the sick and tend them. . . ."

"No goodt, senhor! I see all zat an' 'aff explainéd to my gouvernment. Zey say, tell 'im go avay—go at onze. An' zo I tell you now. Go! Mage zail so zat your sheep not come more close an' I go again see wot I can do. Is zat onderstood?"

"Quite. I agree. Send me a doctor and medicine. I ask no more."

"Goodt! I go now . . . but ze fort remain. No come more closer. It eis danger*euse!*"

. . . .

In ten minutes the *Tiger* pawed the seas, unhindered by God or man; a hushed night domed over them. She rolled slightly on the swell; blocks creaked, sails clanged; otherwise she remained still as the Chinese characters carven upon the ship's scroll.

Then came dawn. A brazen shield set on edge and palpitating upon a brazen sea. No other movement. The birds idle, waiting for the *Tiger* to spring. Colours hanging on the yardarm at the fort.

The *Tiger's* people could not read them. They

hung like dish-clouts heavy with water . . . but they conveyed an order.

"You are nearer," it said, on the one hand. "If you do not draw off I shall fire," on the other.

It was like threatening to hang a deaf mute.

Half an hour passed, then came a flash, unseen in the haze. Something skipped whining across the bow and plunged. Then came a voice—boom!

No one on the *Tiger* doubted the meaning of these things. "Shell!" That was the cry. Men livid with rage shook weak fists at the coast line. "Devils! Devils of Hell!" they panted.

"I asked bread," King paraphrased up there on the poop with Lang, "and you give me a stone."

He called the watch—

"Hoist our signal there. 'Ship out of control.' 'There is no wind,' a damned fact that should be obvious."

They made two banderoles of parti-coloured flags and hung them from yard and peak, one to either quarter, which gave the *Tiger* a birthday halo. As she rolled with the pendulous swing of the tropics, the bunting rippled out on this side and on that as ribbons flicker when they are hung near a punkah.

Perhaps the fort was able to read these signals. Perhaps the latent intelligence of those who ordered it discovered at length the vessel was becalmed. No more shells came out to greet the

*Tiger*. Nor did the gunboat appear . . . nor the doctor . . . nor any medicine . . .

It was as though Rio had hoisted a signal which said " R.I.P.," turned over and gone to sleep.

. . . .

That night they cleared the hospital and again filled it . . . two in bunks, one on a mattress spread on the sails.

And when morning glowed upon them, puffing hot breath in the eyes of those who watched and slept alike, the ship was nearer Cape Frio than Rio . . . nearer the last stage which all men approach once than the beauty and truculence and stupidity which reigned in Brazil's chief city.

## VI

In three days Humboldt's current, which has its birth in Central Pacific and comes sweeping round Cape Horn and thence north, carried the *Tiger* once more past Cape Frio without any breath of wind to aid her. She sagged steadily and imperceptibly, sails slatting as she rolled in the swell which marches unhindered from twenty-five degrees south, where the trades are born, and runs to make music on the barrier reefs of Brazil. Out there, perhaps a hundred miles east, a fresh wind blew. Could they reach it it would carry them whither they listed—south to the River Plate and Rosario ; north-east to Ascension or St. Helena ; south to the rolling forties and the gales which would drive them to the Cape.

That was the choice left for Captain King and those *Tigers* who still survived. Of them, the three latter, each of them British, inspired hope ; for of South American empiricism they had supped to the full. Fevers, ships with the yellow angel at the fore, were anathema in Brazil, and for all King knew to the contrary, in Paraguay as well. A clean bill of health is essential for a newcomer if he is to obtain pratique, sometimes even

that is ineffectual, and the *Tiger's* record was tainted past all forgiveness.

It was twelve o'clock on this day of blazing sunshine and oiled surfaces ; the sun nearly overhead; a point of land beckoning. King and the second mate had just taken sights for the noon-day fix and were going down to work them up when a group of three sailors left their awning forward and came aft.

Astern was this point of land, green, seductive to look upon . . . palms feather-edged against the blue ; a strip of yellow sand, a line of white surf . . . cocoa-nuts, bananas, breadfruit, monkeys, parrots . . . and the essential beach. Why remain on the *Tiger* to rot and be thrown to the sharks while that sits waiting for you ? they asked. Was it in nature to resist ? For two hours they had been looking at that beach and tasting the fruit which they swore was there. They came aft on the spur of this knowledge. They wanted to see the old man. They were hale, civil but determined, and when they had their wish, said with one voice :

" We not go more furzer. We not pass zat, so please you," they jerked fingers indicating their paradise. " If we stay 'ere we die—morto . . . go in ze sea. No puede, señor. We wanch boatee, wanch go altogezzer . . . no ? "

" Boat, eh ? " King looked down on them, aware that he had been expecting a recrudescence of this madness. " But if I give you a boat and

you row in, they will not let you land," he said.

" We no let zem see us lan' . . . we go ashore in ze night, sink ze boatee, passa—so, we ship-wreck . . . no clothes—nada . . ."

" Nonsense. They watch the coast. They can see us here now. Do you suppose they don't know what ship this is ? "

" Sare—we like better go quiet . . . se coursa you spick no go, we take ze boatee an' go allee same-a . . ."

And from another voice came :

" Wot sort of a game is it to set down 'ere an' watch ourselves bloody-well die ? We got no physic an' we got no doctor . . . don't know wots wrong wi' us . . . don't know nothin' . . . that's true, ain't it ? "

" True ? Oh yes, I don't dispute that ; but, if you men go who is left to work the ship ? You recognise we are down to bare buff as it is, I suppose . . . not a man too many even here ? "

" Aye." They saw it ; quite plainly they saw it.

" *Se coursa* you not come—zat so. W'y not all go togezzer ? " one questioned, glib in persuasion.

" That certainly would give the show away," King retorted. " Think it out, men. Do you imagine if they would not allow us to go into quarantine at Rio, miles from the city, they will permit any tom-fool landing here ? "

" They no see us come. We go away in ze

dark," they reiterated. "No boat zere wen day come . . . three, four mans—*no mas!*"

"It's certain death 'ere, sir," the other speaker asserted. "Give us the boat, we'll take the risk."

King looked down at the struggling crowd, for all hands had come out at sound of the talk. He decided to see how deep this thing had gone, and said, half banteringly: "Well, well, we must consider that, too." He glanced at those from the after deck-house. "Any one else want to go ashore? Come! hands up those who are for the shore."

The original trio lifted in response. Another tardily followed; all from forward. One or two of the afterguard joined in, then withdrew. The position was evident. Those who remained would be too weak to work the ship. King saw the hesitation in spite of the knowledge he had gained; saw there were others on the edge of desertion, and broke in once more:

"This is serious, men. I didn't think that because Rio played it low down, you would do the same. It means desertion. Call all hands to muster!" He turned to Lang. "Go aft, sir, and tell the man at the wheel to lash it and come for'ard."

In five minutes they were all in place, facing the break of the poop and the scroll with its story of him who would ride a tiger. King and Lang looked down on them from an embrasure beside the poop ladder.

"Men," said Captain King, "you were not all present just now. I am told that some of you have decided to go ashore. It is suggested that I give you a boat and food. The shore is there—three or four miles distant. There is no difficulty about getting there; but there is a difficulty about landing."

He repeated the argument he had already used and went on:

"If you say you are prepared to risk what may meet you over there, I shall not hinder you; but I can't have you go in ignorance of what may happen. I could shoot you down there, as you stand . . . but I shall not shoot. You say it's death to stay here. I agree that is possible; but I want you to recognise it's death over there, too . . .

"I want to point out, also, that we have no case on board at present. We all seem fit and hearty, and this thing we've been suffering from is one of the kind that runs like a fire until it has burned itself out . . . perhaps it makes a clean sweep; perhaps only tackles the weakly, then stops . . .

"We have no means of telling whether it is done or only taking breath; but we have no sick on board to-day, and it may be an indication of change. Maybe if we stick together and fight it out we shall all step ashore and draw our pay; but the one thing of which I am very sure, is that if we stick together and pull together we are more

likely than not to pull through. It is despair, fear, that takes men off in a case like this, often as not. Those who have no fear survive. I can't put it plainer than that. In fact, it is all I have to say. It is for you to choose now. There's the shore. I give you a boat and sufficient water and provisions to carry you through twenty-four hours. You can be ashore in two. Now—those who are going hold up one hand—so. Understand ? "

This time the three sailors led, the fourth held back ; one of the boys and the steward followed. King looked about, giving the names, which Lang noted. " Five," he said. " That leaves us with seven . . . or is it six, Lang ? Never mind. . . . You going, steward ? How's that ? " He faced the Mexican, his lips in line.

" I—if you please, sir, yes, sir. My wife she live in Rio. I no stay. She go presently to Rosario, w'ere she take bus-i-ness togezzer wiz me . . ."

" I see. Well, I shall not hold you." He looked across. " You, there, Larry, boy . . . you held your hand up, too. Why are you going ? "

" Please, sir, I'm afraid to stay, sir."

" Afraid, eh ? And you are not afraid to try to land on that beach ? Lord ! give me patience. Who has persuaded you to go ? . . . not Sails or Chips, I'll swear. Who ? Tell me."

" No one, sir. I—I saw Tommy when he was

dying, sir . . . and please, sir, I don't want to die like that . . ."

"Naturally. Well, but who says you will? You are just as likely to die over there. What about your indentures, my boy—and what shall I say to your father?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Neither do I. Well—you must do as you choose. But I can't let you go unwarned. When you land go to the British Consul and ask him to send you home. For English boys who stay anywhere up and down this forsaken coast, there is a worse death than death of plague on board the *Tiger*. I can't argue. What will you do? Sails, take him in hand and let me know."

"Mr. Lang!" He turned about. "I'm going down to work her up; get the cover off the port boat and put her overside. She will leak like a sieve after this grilling, so put a couple of buckets in her and keep her slung. She will have taken up to some degree by sundown. Give me your altitude, too. I will check it." He took a note of it: "87° 54′ 30″ . . . right under!" he commented. "Difficult. Mine is 87° 56′ 45″ . . ."—he glanced aloft—"and we are going to be very short-handed, Lang. It won't run to kites. . . . Very well, get the royals and light stay-s'ls in at four o'clock and furl them. Furl the flying jib also . . . then get all hands on the mains'l. Furl it and provision the boat—then send the men to tea."

He walked aft, Lang accompanying him.

"I don't like it," he insisted. "The longer I think of it the less possible it seems; but I can't help feeling that if I use force I may be condemning some of them, anyhow. I don't like that. . . . It looks, George! it looks, unless we get a breeze through her pretty soon, as though the *Tiger* theory is going to pan out four-square, whether we ride or whether we climb down . . ."

He came to the companion, entered it and went to his cabin.

## VII

They moved towards the yellowing dawn one morning, nearly a week later, with leeches taut and a breeze humming on their starboard beam. They sailed to greet the sun in jocular mood and inclined to crow, because they had seen the last of those faint-hearts who had elected to desert them. They pictured them among the palms and jungle just beyond that stretch of shining sand, questioning what sort of life it could be where men lived on breadfruit and bananas, eat grilled monkey and drank the milk of cocoa-nuts.

Some there were who shook heads over it, talked of snakes and things they called tri-antelopes, in the manner of the boatman at Deal, and seemed to think the *Yellow Angel* and her death-roll happiness by comparison.

They had escaped the belt of calms which had held them so long, and remembered that for eight days no new case had appeared. A wave of optimism born of the splendid days kept them jaunty and ready to sing. True, there were but seven of them to work the ship, including the old man ; but they recked not of this. Most of

them were young, ready for any experience, so that it varied, and were untouched by the thrall which induces men to hasten slowly. Then, as luck would have it, as the dawn grew they espied beneath the foot of the foresail a little blotch of smoke gathered in a knot on the port bow. A steamer, without doubt. Possibly a man-o'-war. One which presently would be seen flying the white ensign with the red cross and heraldic quarterings, which all the world loves.

Word went away at once. The men clustered on the lee rail marking her approach, her course, whether she was firing up or under easy steam. They seemed content with that ; but the old man standing aft, shutting the telescope with which he had searched her, had other views. Lang and one of the boys—the last—joined him and got mixed up with flags and halliards in a whirl of energy. Then presently a signal went fluttering to the mizzen truck and blew out bravely. " R.N.D.," it said in the language of the sea, which meant, " Close. I wish to communicate."

Lordly ! Nothing less. From plague-ridden *Tiger* to R.M.S. *Cranbill.* No by your leave, or will you have the goodness to come away out of your course and talk ? . . . Nothing. Just the every-day cry of a ship. No reason at all—only the terse request. The steamer now showed herself to be brig-rigged, taut and trim, and there were those peering under the foresail who still

said, " She's a man-o'-war ! " and sang pæans of delight when she hoisted a pennant which said merely—" Yes."

The *Tiger* sent up her ensign, the steamer followed suit. It was not the white ensign of the Navy she flew, but the red, which is its elder brother. She drew quite near, and it was seen that her decks were crowded with people, women and children among them. An order came from the poop, " Lay the main yard aback."

Those who were left of the crew moved smartly to obey. They saw what they called " a chance " on the horizon. It was plain a doctor and medicine would be forthcoming. " Good, my sons ! Let her 'av it ! " they sang raucously as the yards came in ; shouted when they commenced to run, " Hold her ! Hold her, Sails ! " and skipped away with the slack of the braces as they cried.

Meanwhile flags had been at work. What was required had been stated, and the mail ship presently lay to windward, while a boat pulled across the narrow stretch which lay between. As she came near King left the poop in charge of Lang and went to one of the great after-cabin windows to signal his presence. He would be nearer those with whom he must talk. He would be able to ask questions without explaining to his crew how little he knew. There were two officers in the stern sheets, both in tropical uniform, white and blue ; one wearing two gold bands

on his cuffs and one with two gold and a red band between. . . . "So! That was good." At length he was in touch with a doctor, one of those for whom he had prayed. The boat swung lazily head to sea, just under the stern, and splashed at the swell. "Captain's compliments, sir," said the navigator, looking up. "He bids me say he will do what he can; but we are bound to Brazil and The Plate with over six hundred passengers on board, and he must obey instructions. Otherwise, as you are aware, we could not obtain pratique at Rio and might have to carry our people back to Europe . . ."

King acknowledged that. "I was afraid of it," he said. "I tried to get help there myself; but they chased me out with shell fire. . . . Still, you, sir," he looked at the doctor, "can give me some advice even if you do not see the sick."

"Of course . . . but it's no use mincing matters. We are in the hands of the Brazilians, and if you have had any sort of fever on board, I dare not board you and return to my own ship. You understand that?"

"Naturally."

He took out a note-book and opened it. "We see from your signals that you have lost ten of your crew from some sort of disease since you left the Thames . . . Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Have you any one on the sick list now?"

"No. We have been free for eight days."

"Good. Then it is quite possible it will not recur. It has exhausted its strength. We understand, too, there was glandular trouble among the symptoms—is that correct?"

"Yes. But the chief characteristics were headache, vomiting and sleeplessness and by the second day delirium and high temperature, pulse racing . . . but it was so rapid, all of it, one could hardly keep in touch. There was lung trouble in two cases . . ."

"And all died within forty-eight or sixty hours?" the doctor commented.

"Every one."

"Has the ship been in the East recently?"

"Until last voyage she was a China trader—tea, coolies, the usual round."

"Ah! I'm afraid that clinches it. All the symptoms point to it . . . the contagion is in her bones. Were you in her last voyage, sir."

"No. And since I sailed I have discovered that the same thing happened on her last trip."

"Damnable! That means," the doctor fumed, "the usual stupid neglect, perfunctory service—simple fumigation instead of triple distilled. You see," he explained rapidly as the boat rose and fell on the sparkling sea, "if it is what I suspect, no one knows how the infection is carried, where it originates or how to treat it when it arrives. As far as medical science is concerned at present, it is incurable. . . . We know nothing of it. Probably it germinates in the East. One of nature's

methods of getting rid of surplus population. . . . You have heard of the Black Death of the fourteenth century and the Plagues of London? Well—both were brought to Europe by travellers from the East. China probably . . . where your ship has traded . . ."

"Good God! And you can do nothing to help me?"

"Very little. . . . Wait! I see one possibility. I may not come myself; but we have several doctors on our passenger list. I might be able to persuade one. . . . What do you think, Archer?" he appealed to his companion. "Think either of them would volunteer?"

"Not if I know anything of them—they're the wrong type."

"I know. But don't forget that the man who can discover the germ of this disease will go down the ages with the reputation of Jenner or Koch . . ."

"I don't think I see either of the men you are considering taking it on, out here . . . wouldn't it be rather like playing bowls with the devil?"

King interrupted this. It was obvious that he and those who remained with him would be the sole scientists engaged. He must pray for a breeze which would enable him to reach Ascension or St. Helena. "I am short of disinfectants," he said. "Can you give me something that will touch it?"

"There is none except fire. Total destruction

of all contaminated cabins, clothes, beds—everything."

"Drastic!" King commented. "Well, if it is essential I will do it. Sorry to have held you up so long, sir. Better get back to your ship, and if either of your doctors volunteer, I shall welcome him, be sure of that. If on the other hand they will not tackle it, hoist the D pennant over Q. I shall understand. I will remain hove to until I see your signal. If one will come hoist the C pennant over Q. And you, sir," he turned to the navigator, "please tell your captain I shall make for Ascension. I hoped to get St. Helena, but the wind is too shy . . . and, if you come across the white ensign anywhere on this God-forsaken coast, just tell her captain my story and give him my position when you kick off . . ."

"I say!" the doctor intoned, as the boat began to turn. "Don't think I funk coming. I would like a shot, but I'm tied . . ."

"I know you are tied," King answered. "I am tied. All sailors are tied. It is our birthright."

"I have six or seven hundred people relying on me and I can't leave them in the lurch. You understand they wouldn't pass my ship in any harbour over there—if I were not on board to sign papers?"

"I know! Yes—I know. I know, too, there is only one kind of ship afloat that can give me help, and one nationality. She will be flying the

white ensign when we come across her. A brother of ours, up there!" he flicked a finger to indicate the colours at the gaff end. "So long!"

"Even a naval doctor would have to chuck his ship to tackle your business!" the doctor emphasised.

"Yes. And he would do it even if he had to chuck the service—if you ask me. Still, I recognise the cases are not parallel."

The boat drew off, throwing showers of spray, white in the dazzling light. Hands were lifted in salute. A voice shouted once more: "So long!" and King mounted to greet Lang.

"The D pennant will be hoisted over there above Q, within an hour," he announced. "We wait for that."

"No luck, sir?"

"It depends on the signal. If C is hoisted over Q we can hope; if D . . . er . . . we can brace up the main yard."

He came right aft and stood with his second in command watching the boat's passage, the beautiful lines of the halted mailship as she lay athwart the breeze, trim and ordered as a man-o'-war. It seemed impossible that she could leave him to fight his fight alone; but he was under no illusion here. He was mounted on the tiger, and no one could help him to dismount who could not first slay the tiger. He was aware, too, that no doctor would be likely to pry into the secrets of this disease unless

he was equipped with the passion for research and with the implements necessary to carry it through. Meanwhile the boat arrived alongside and in a few minutes was hanging level with the rail, her crew climbing on board. So ! that was over. Now for a walk. Then to take sights . . . and, more difficult, to forget.

. . . .

An hour later Lang came to the cabin and reported : " D.Q., sir, is hoisted."

" Ah ! Then we may brace her up, Mr. Lang. Thank you."

He sat back in his chair visualising the scene. A flicker of blue and yellow bunting climbing to the signal yard. A quartermaster, clean and alert with his telescope, waiting for the answer ; seeing it, jerking with his hand—" Haul down ! " Then after a pause, again a signal as the ship kicked out on her course. " A pleasant passage to you," or, as we would say who stand on the threshold of a friend's door, " Au revoir."

His eyes narrowed. He sat looking down the cabin listening, not for the first time, to the patter of feet somewhere behind the ship's skin. Rats ? He shook this off and climbed again to join Lang on the poop.

The sun dazzled him. Blue sky, blue sea ; blue, blue—the essence and soul of life announced and latent in every curling wavelet, in every flash of sun-lit foam. He leaned over the rail drinking it in, acknowledging at the same moment that he

stood on the deck of a vessel where death was supreme.

"God's in His heaven, all's well with the world."

From some forgotten spring the phrase recurred. He became restive under its touch, crossed over and saw Lang bent over the rabbit run, watching the young ones skittering to and fro. He glanced up as the captain joined him, saying: "I always thought these things were born with lop ears; but I must have been wrong. These are short . . . more like rats' ears . . ."

King followed this comment quite casually, other thoughts in hand, then said: "They eat a devil of a lot—I have noticed that. . . . Jove! you're right. How curious. Some kind of throw-back, I suppose." He straightened his back, his mind instantly reverting to its burden, and put one hand on Lang's shoulder. "Never mind that," the words fell lightly, "we have other things to consider. This is no child's play we are up against. . . . I suppose you have scarcely thought about it—from that angle. It is the plague. The plague," he repeated, grave as Lang had never seen him. "But no one must know it . . . only you and I, who are here to fight it . . . you understand that?"

Lang, basking in the friendly touch, the unusual consideration, looked up with: "Yes, sir. I think I had a sort of notion that was what we were up against. . . . Luck! But we seem to have

got the better of it. We have had no case for twelve days."

"True," King said. "That is how we stand at the moment—but we must consider what is to be done if there is any return."

They went round to windward and sat on the rabbit hutch licking the thing into shape.

"First, and of immense importance," he resumed, "it is essential that neither you nor I dread the thing. It is malignant only with those who fear it." He put it so, wondering in his mind how he came to think of it.

"Naturally, sir. It's so in the case of all infectious diseases . . . so they say." He turned to the hutch and dragged forth one of the "rabbits." "There! I could have sworn to it. The thing has neither the teeth nor the ears nor the colour of rabbit. It looks like a rat . . . but isn't."

"Never mind that," King reiterated. "We have to decide what we are going to do."

## VIII

There were two havens in King's thoughts from the moment it became apparent he could get no help from the Brazils. One was St. Helena, distant about two thousand seven hundred miles, the other Ascension, perhaps a thousand miles less, and at both the naval ensign flew.

St. Helena would have been his objective, without question, had the *Tiger's* crew been fit ; but you cannot thrash a square-rigged vessel across the strongest section of the trades with six men. For that reason, in his talk with Lang he decided they must take the shorter passage and risk the lighter winds, perhaps the calms and doldrums as they approached the Line, rather than venture too greatly.

These factors count at sea, even when a ship is fully manned and well found. No sailor would overlook them. With a strong crew he will move for strong winds rather than light. You can work with a breeze, but with calms and light airs you merely drift with what current there is.

. . . .

The truth plainly set before these two was that the *Tiger* was crippled. She was " down to a

gantline," as men say at sea when they wish to express they are taking great risks, and dare no more. King could afford nothing. He might elect to sup with the devil, but he must demand the long spoon. It was useless to go beating around in the hope of falling in with some one who could help him. He was a sailor. A man trained to examine his charts and his sailing directions, to consult his experience, and from these elements to decide what he must do. He was trained to fight things out ; to make " gear " if it were not on board ; to lay down a course and stick to it. He was the supreme arbiter of all those *Tigers* who remained to him ; their master and commander up to the gates of release or of death . . . and, by mutual consent, he shared their perils, their hopes, and strove to keep empty of their fears.

The smooth way and the rough way lay before him. It was beyond the wit of man to say which would prove the shorter—not in distance, but in the time occupied in covering the distance. Time over and over again he decided must be the essence of the contract. " I must get in somewhere before I lose any more hands," he said to that *alter ego* who walked increasingly beside him as days passed. " With any sort of luck we shall do it if I take the shorter passage. With any return of the plague," he called it so openly now, " we shall go out."

He set these factors down quite plainly for

those to read who might come after him. To Lang, who was his chief, his companion and adviser, he said very little. Nothing to any of lesser rank . . . and Lang was a boy! A boy in hope and jollity; in his readiness to make shift, to laugh at difficulties, to pin his faith to luck or a mascot; to inspire, as perhaps only youth can when men are aligned to fight the last fight of all.

Death had taken very liberal toll of this crew since that night when they lay in the Downs, the beautiful Kentish land hidden in mist. Something mysterious had assailed them. Without warning, without any terrifying flourish to announce its coming, it attacked, and he who sickened as swiftly died. In a few hours his messmates were gathered in a group to bury him. The crew called their assailant by many names—chiefly the impersonal IT; for they had no knowledge of the Black Death or the Plagues of London. Their readings from history were long forgotten; but their sickness stood close, glowering on those who thought. They knew it was not cholera or either of the diseases with which sailors come in contact during their voyages. They knew, too, that, whatever it was, the medicine chest of a clipper which no longer carried passengers was not equipped to fight it.

The only two persons who knew or guessed said nothing, lest a panic ensued. The men grumbled. They considered they were not fairly treated, and Sails, who had been promoted

to take the second mate's berth when Everitt died, asked with some heat, "whether any one supposed it was an officer's duty to study medicine. If any one wanted a dose of salts let him come aft and say so, with no more talk."

. . . .

Since that day when the trades had thrust a long finger to the coast and plucked them from stagnation, they had revelled in a fresh and vivifying breeze which carried them steadily towards the east ; steadily nearer the sun. Sea and sky were sparkling, alive and brimed with the wine of the trades. The sickness seemed to have passed them by. For twelve days there had been no fresh case. Flying fish came over the lee rail as they heeled to the breeze ; bonito, albacore and dolphin foamed under the bows. The men strove to harpoon them, to catch them with line and hook, hurled "grains" at them, and sometimes took a fish. Then one day, five since the steamer had cheered them with her message, Lang came up the poop ladder with a spring that showed haste.

He joined his commander and began speaking. The man at the wheel taking notes, reporting presently in the fo'c'sle, said, "He looked scared, but they went on walking up and down, talkin' like you or me might, perhaps about the weather. Then suddenly the old man slues round an' quits the poop, turnin' back his cuffs. Of course, I knew what that meant . . ."

A droning song emerged momentarily as King opened and closed the door of the deck-house.

It was Freddy who was down—the survivor of the four boys who had come on board in smart uniforms to learn the duties which lead to command. He had been in his bunk since midnight, but he had not reported sick—because he swore he was well . . . bravado ; pluck—call it what you will . . . and now a song escaped his door !

Outside was the sparkling sea, the trade wind sky carrying white clouds to swell the rains in equatorial doldrums ; the birds which followed them, always on the wing, circling the ship as she dipped and splashed towards her bourn. Inside the room the boy, already in high fever—parched, sleepless, tossing, hardly conscious of his surroundings—his voice raised in monotonous outcry, scuffling mentally with visions he could not comprehend.

Just a boy. One of the afterguard learning to be a sailor ; to command men.

King stood over him, noting the similarity of this case with those which had gone before, and having assured himself on this produced a box of matches, lighted a lamp and walked slowly round the cabin, examining the deck. It seemed that he had forgotten the boy altogether. The cabin was dark, badly lighted, unventilated. Once or twice he got close down to investigate certain marks with the magnifying glass he had

taken from his sextant case. He remained uncertain, perhaps unsatisfied. The deck was grimy, and in that state would show the marks for which he searched better than if it were clean. He drew out one of the sea chests which stood in a row before the bunks, and lay flat upon the deck, throwing the light under them.

After a minute he wriggled nearer, pushing the light in advance and remained quite still. Sometimes it seemed he scratched the bulkhead ; a noise, very slight, came from the recess. Again, after a while, he scrambled back and stood looking at the boy, noting the dirge which came from his lips, his unconscious state ; then found the carpenter's sounding rod hanging near the door, took it and crept back.

As he did so he pushed a chest to gain more room. Instantly there was a squeal, a race of some small thing crossing the deck, and silence.

King got up now, brought back the lamp, the sounding rod, and sat down on the chest beside the boy. He leaned forward, extinguished the lamp, then, chin in hand, stared as one might who sees visions.

. . . .

At noon that day the boy was in bed in the ship's hospital and beyond aid, while King, who had ordered his removal, sat on a chest in the deck-house searching the blankets which had covered the boy. He used the small magnifying glass constantly, plucked at the wool and squeezed

with his nails. For a long time this search continued, then he went on deck and closed the door, his decision made.

He saw a group standing before the sailroom. With the recrudescence of this attack a sort of panic assailed the crew. They saw their numbers picked out one by one, hoisted, struck. They were helpless. Laughter died. They stood there scowling, asking with folded arms what it was they were up against. They faced their commander, the old man as they called him, as he approached with rigid muscles. Something 'av got t' be done. . . . What? They stood there, four all told, ignorant, suspicious—Sails one of the group—and asked to be led . . . for light . . . what was to do? Where did it come from . . . how were they to kill it? Sails admitted quite gently that he was afraid. . . . "Nothin' in sight, sir," he put it so, "in a manner of speaking. Nothin' to get hold of when it hits you . . . nothin'! An' there's the wife an' childer at 'ome . . ."

"Fire!" King answered, standing to face them as Lang came down the ladder to join him. "Fire! It's the only medicine we have."

"Fire? How, when . . . what fire?" the men jerked from one to another.

"That house, the fo'c'sle, cabin . . . everything that's in them," said King, looking them over. "Clothes, boots, beds—everything."

"'Strewth! Then let it be fire. A man can

but die once. Face it. It 'ud be somethin' done!"

No objection was made by either of the four. They set to work, King directing them, helping them; Lang at the wheel, the wind falling.

At two o'clock they had commenced to demolish the deck-house, whence, as all knew, all recent cases had emerged. They screwed on the ship's fire hose and played water on the deck. They built a barrier of sails to hold it there. Then they set turpentined wads in the house and worked to keep the flames in control.

Clothes were thrown to the blaze, beds, blankets, sea chests, trinkets, the photographs and albums sailors carry and love to scrutinise on Sunday—all made fuel to feed this fire. They brought out the deck chairs, the cushions from the settees, the carpets, matting, everything that would burn and would carry infection, and threw it upon the fire. Flames leaped high in that central space between the scroll, with its legend of the tiger, and the mainmast. They scorched the gilded spear-points and Chinese characters upon it; brought a rash of bubbles upon the teak, the bucket rack, the stanchions, and spread panic among the inhabitants of the hutches. They blistered the paint on either rail, made havoc of the deck; but kept the fire isolated in its moat till the place stood charred and in ruins.

They cheered when this appeared certain. It

was six o'clock, the first dog-watch past, darkness at hand, tea to consider. Then King decreed they all must strip. They must go naked, and the clothes they wore, caps, boots, everything they had on must be carried to the galley and placed in the ship's ovens. Thus only would it be possible to erect a barrier between them and the thing that struck them down. They must understand they were fighting now for life, to reach Ascension without further loss.

The men stared, but they grasped what was required and obeyed. They carried their garments to the galley door and stood naked, watching while one of their number, acting as cook, took the things gingerly with tongs and thrust them into the oven ; flung wide the furnace door and stoked, the flame lighting him—a shadow, gigantic and menacing, towering over him on the bulkhead. Then, in the short twilight which falls upon a ship in the tropics, they came into the waist, where plugged scuppers and sails held the water in control, and bathed. They stood in turn while the hose was played, and got naked to the levers that the others might bathe . . .

They took tea that night *al fresco*, and nakedly ran about eating biscuits and lumps of fat pork, drinking tea and cutting capers there, where the water lay still warm from the fire. Then with pipes alight they went to work to clear the wreck. They prised and cut away timbers, scattering sparks and chaff, and tossed the lumber over-

board. They worked with a zest that seemed heroic, destroying—always destroying.

At eight o'clock the house was gone, "razeed," as they termed it, flush with the deck ; the cabin and fo'c'sle gutted and ready for the searing.

That night and in future they must sleep on the bare deck. Until they reached their island they must go with a suit of clothes apiece—clothes not yet out of the ship's crematorium. The god who ruled them, too, proved obdurate. They must go naked all night. "Bare buff" was the word, and they went about damning the thing and its methods ; uncertain of their defences ; sitting or crouching together because they feared to remain alone. And when the moon rose they started work. It was cold.

At six o'clock the brazen shield which climbed daily to scorch them looked over the eastern rim and found them busy with tar and pitch and hot irons—busy and naked. And, as if he had awaited that, word came from the old man ordering all to dress. They rose and went for their gear like children who had learned that discipline, if it be good and well kept, produces honours and sometimes an additional tot. It sounded funny—this order which brought them to the galley door ; but they were in no mood to find jokes ; they were engrossed with that great scar on the deck aft, busy in fo'c'sle and cabin, plastering the decks and seams, and knee-high all round the partitions between cabins

with the medicine which should stay their plague —busy, busy as never before had seemed possible.

King and Lang stooped over a charred hole in the deck which lay at the base of one of the main timbers of the vanished house. They were filling it with a mixture of white lead, putty, smashed glass and tin tacks. They gave it full measure, levelled it and covered it with a board which they nailed in place. . . . They stood together holding the tools with which they had worked, and King said : " I believe that's safe . . . the question arises, though, is it the only one or are there others ? "

Lang, cheery as though the possibility could not be, answered : " I'd like to be as sure we'll get new gear for the stuff we've burnt, sir."

Meanwhile the wind steadily fell, and at midnight, two days later, when they buried the boy, it was not necessary to back the main yard.

Meanwhile, too, as though the thing jeered at the pains they took to slaughter it, two others sickened and were carried to their home amidst the sails.

## IX

King, Lang, Sails remained.

These three men, two of them officers, were better prepared by environment and education to withstand disease, push away infection and refuse the sterile impulses of panic than the rest of the ship's company. At the moment they stood fast, " and might to the end," as Lang said, " with luck." . . . Chance, in other words, good fortune—one's lot in life under the moon, the sun and the stars, controlling forces all—that was to be the supreme power here. Luck ! Just that !

In his cabin King sat considering this.

If it were the controlling factor, then nothing he could do would alter it a jot. If it were the controlling factor, it was master and beautifully conscious of mastery ; conscious that if it withheld luck, then these sailor men would go out, fighting or lying down to it ; it mattered very little which.

He saw, too, that what they, individually, chose to do was as securely hidden from luck as from themselves. Intelligence did not count. Nature herself was not more steeped in guile than this thing they called luck ! He was conscious, too,

that it was a matter of supreme indifference to luck *in esse*, whether it came to their assistance or held aloof. Luck would survive the defeat of these men. It would win no laurels by directing them. It would not be assailed by the mob who touch wood to woo it for refusing to help them to get out of what they called the wood. It would listen to them, benign of aspect, while they explained one to another their luck was out !

Logically, these men had elected to fight forces which were plainly arrayed against them—in the first place, because jail would have been their portion had they refused to carry out a contract they had accepted ; now, because they were unable to escape the consequences of that Quixotism. King pushed the thing from him. It existed to be fought, yet argument remained.

These three sturdy ones so far, owing to luck, had survived. Admitted. And the upshot depended on luck. Yes, but what was luck ? He drew a wry face. " Did they expect miracles, some kind of roc which should come out of the east, pluck them from their coffin and carry them comfortably home." Again he pushed it from him, aware that it was trivial, that it led nowhere, yet unable to shake it off . . .

After all, what was there they could do ? He settled down to examine this. They might continue to chase goblins as King chased them, or as Lang and Sails chased them. For King, the goblins were tracks which must be blocked ;

for Lang, who had talked with Everitt, luck and a striped thing that smiled ; for Sails, a certitude that some one plotted to slay him—who, whether King or Lang, he failed to decide, and being an honest doubter held his hand.

What could either or all of them together do ? Sitting down with charts, notes and a picture of the thing as it was leaves one hopeless, face to face with the bare logic of facts.

The trade wind had failed them. It was content now, because the sun had killed it, to blow in gusts called squalls, usually from the south, and to rain until the ship's decks aped the Cumberland Fells in winter. They were more than two hundred miles from Ascension and too far north. They had been carried thither, not by the adventitious hurricane of those who write tales, but by natural forces known as the Brazil and subsidiary currents, and were idly increasing that distance. There were three men on board and one of them was puzzled to know which of the other two he should slay.

Was it luck, chance, or the inevitable march of events and conditions they faced ?

To pry too deeply in metaphysical principles leads to a multiplication of words, often without principle ; words which lead round and about and block the round. Luck is luck, and all the arguments of those who prate of it will not alter its incidence a jot. It is yours, or it is not yours. You cannot win it by sitting down to pray for it ;

but it may be yours in an instant of time. It is as elusive as will-o'-the-wisp, as irrational as man ; as beautiful, when it is yours, as hope ; as terrible, when it strips you and flings you aside, as Nature.

These three sturdy ones might have put a boat overside and tried to stem the current with *Tiger* on the end of a towline ; or they might have provisioned a boat, made sail in her and tempted the sea and the sun of those latitudes while they strove towards Ascension. They could have done that . . . but they would not have reached the island.

Sails made this certain one night when Lang was on watch by going on all fours past the skylight with a knife in his teeth, at a moment when Lang was busy with the striped thing that smiled. A shot from the revolver worn by the watch decided that for all time. Then Lang came down to call King, distraught as a man may be who has escaped the death he visualised, together with the death that was to creep upon him.

He lay there in the doorway to King's cabin sobbing, unstrung ; a child suddenly in terror, suddenly persuaded he has committed the last sin. King leaped from his settee and took him by the shoulder!—

" Steady, Lang ! Steady ! Don't get rattled . . . worst possible thing for you . . . me, too, by George." He stopped over him puzzled. " Come ! Get up and tell me what's wrong." He

crossed the cabin and found whisky, a glass—poured. "Here, drink this. . . . Do you good . . . what's wrong?"

Lang, troubled now with a double horror, said in a few choked sentences what had occurred.

"Hum!" King breathed. "On all fours?"

"Just that, sir. My luck. . . . He gave me no end of a scare, for of course I didn't dream he would . . . would go like that—would you, sir. And I was thinking . . ." he paused, flushing like a boy.

"Thinking, eh? What of?"

"The tiger story, you remember, that Everitt used to . . ."

The captain stood up. He had his measure. "Look here, Lang," he said. "I wouldn't think of that. Shake clear of it. Push it away. Brooding . . . does no good . . . I'm going on deck. Feel better?"

"Thanks, yes."

"Good. Put your head in a basin of water and have a rub down. Come up in half an hour. We must have a talk when you're fit."

He went out and presently stood looking down on Sails—the one man of all the crew who had told him he was afraid. Well, it was quite obvious what had happened in his case. He was dead. Shot through the heart, probably as he came bounding along to use the knife. Horrible!

King sat on the rail staring at the sea when he had ascertained this. Already he was alone.

He recognised Lang did not count — poor chap !

Night babbled musically to the listening heavens. Little jets of sound that come to a becalmed ship ; the slam of her sails asking for wind, the cry of a bird questioning why she remained still, the kick of rabbits suddenly alarmed by the rush of feet . . . these and other trifles went to swell the chorus of those who still lived and strove for mastery under the dome. A night so blue and pricked with the fires of distant worlds that the ship and her stealthy passage to oblivion seemed part of it—a shadow, ghostly, terrible, but supreme.

At the back of King's mind there throbbed the knowledge that he was alone. He refused to consider it.

Tragedy occurred in the distant world of shore folk, in the England he knew and loved ; but it could not find so beautiful a setting. Often it was crude, a blare of advertisement ; but here was solitude and the blue sheen of waters unruffled as when the Spirit first moved upon them. Strange shapes flicked to the surface, or sounded . . . crevices of light amidst the dark, as though the waters cracked and showed a gleam from the pit. Life still urgent to accomplish its destiny appeared even in the slime and tentacles which thrust out slim fingers from the ship's bends. Meteor fires, some of them, dull blobs which faded slowly ; beads of opal, shining, iridescent

greens and blues trailing amidst the weeds which clung to the ship's side and held her bound.

The night was cool, star-spangled with the golden dust of Milky Way—beneficent day when it came would tear vengefully from them the good the night had found. In a short space day would be upon them again—flame-haunted, brazen, merciless.

For a moment it had been possible to think, even to dream, and the dead gave no pangs ; but day approached and King had work on hand —work he must presently do.

For an hour, he remembered, at dawn, the pageant of the skies would hold him enthralled, speaking its message of hope and peace, reminding him of voices and moments now gone for ever ; never to recur. After that the sun would climb high and he would forget the memories in his attempts to discover whence came the rush of feet. Scintillating waves of heat would strike down, leaving him seared and dizzy. The sea would be a mirror reflecting white-hot rays, and for hours the blazing disc high overhead would blink and pulse forth heat while he and Lang, hiding, would pray for the mellow light of England, the soft, grey tones of an English countryside, the mist-wreathed fens and all the beauty of the silvan screen that God has found her.

Then again would come an hour when colour raged and burned its message of hope and life ; striving perhaps to leave its mark on the blessed

dark which emerged when the sun was gone—flame-haunted—to bed.

. . . .

King got down from the rail and crossed to where Sails lay. He picked him up and carried him to a plank in the ship's waist, whose outer end was lodged in a port. Here he laid him, fastened to his feet a weight and, standing bare-headed, tilted the plank—

Vale !

. . . .

Again he was covered, back on the poop, a bucket of water and a broom in hand . . . lest Lang when he came up should be troubled by what he saw.

To-morrow, he mused, when this was finished, we shall have had three weeks' calm, and for a fortnight before that, doldrums. No wonder men died. Then it occurred to him that years ago, on a voyage home from China, he arrived in the chops of the Channel just in time, as he put it, to fall in with an easterly gale. He was third mate of the *Typhoon* then and responsible for the ship's stores. When the gale had blown itself out they got light easterly winds and made a little headway, then again the gale warmed up and pushed them back. After each revival of gale and calm, they found themselves still farther off, after six weeks' battering, than when they first ran into the easterly. In six weeks, stores were running short, there was little left to weigh out ;

the Channel was blocked with ships all homeward bound, all short of provisions, all signalling as they passed and repassed : "Got any beef to spare ; any bread ?" and always the answer came back : "None—jolly hungry ourselves."

An easterly gale in Channel had as many lives as a cat and each reincarnation is more damnable than the last. Eighty sail of ships were within a couple of hundred miles of Scilly, sometimes crept near enough to get a peep at Lizard ; but always the gale worked up and pushed them all back—like counters on a wire. The wind was fixed in the east ; so the Navy came out with stores to save the crews from starvation.

A bitter, bitter fight. He recalled it, sitting there sweltering, considering his end—if it had not been for the Navy we should have perished like winnuls. The phrase returned exactly as he heard it when a youth. It was the bo'sun's phrase—a big, gaunt man with a pock-marked face and straggly black beard. A man who left no doubt of his meaning on those who heard.

But here was no gale, no cold, no combing seas ; but the lack of all three. Stagnation, lassitude, nothing to do, no men to do it—all these pushed those who were left nearer the brink. The still-born picture was for ever before their eyes—the ship lolling on silent seas, clogged with the rotting elements which produced life in new forms while sapping the old ; the ooze and slime which clung to her weighing her down ;

the sails, masts, yards, rigging, all working loose, making ready to fall piecemeal from aloft to choke her more . . . and above all the agony of men who had seen the plague at work and were unable either to neutralise it or to hasten it.

If she would sink ! God ! if she would sink and end it . . .

. . . .

All wooden ships leak ; but *Tiger's* wells were dry now she lay at her ease. " In a year she might sink," King decided, " or in ten. . . . God knows ! "

He might scuttle her ! An auger . . . an hour or two at work down for'ard would . . . What ? Put them in the boats where they must row . . .

Lang climbed the companion stairs and saw the old man mooning by the rail and wondered what the devil good that would do. He stood looking on.

The sails slatted on the masts. Small shivers ran through them as the ship swayed. They seemed petulant, irritable up there in the dark ; inclined to criticism. . . . Lang drew near his chief, searching the deck as he moved.

" There seems to be more swell, sir, than when it came in dark," he said, " I wonder if we . . ."

" South," King asserted, instantly alert. " Nothing in it. I wish there was."

" Wrong quarter, too," Lang added, " if it did come . . . Luck as usual ! "

" Nonsense. Go and get a pot of tea ready,"

King tossed over his shoulder. "We want ballast, Lang. Very essential to keep fed in times like these. Feel better?"

"Not very fit, sir . . . a bit dizzy somehow."

He did not move.

"Now? Hum! Carry on, my boy. . . . I could do with a cup of tea myself. Come, we'll go and make it together; what do you say?"

In great perturbation he got him away from the place where the thing had smiled upon him, carrying a knife in its teeth.

. . . .

And at sunrise, in spite of the tea, Lang went to lie down for an hour. He said that he would be up and about long before breakfast time; but King, who helped him to his cabin, knew better.

# X

Light climbed over the rim of the world and looked out upon a somnolent sea lying like a silver shield beneath the moon. Spearhead rays swept forth to wake it and found it smooth, oily, without crinkles anywhere on all that glittering surface ; untipped by wind, no coruscations—all flat, unburnished as yet, but like frosted silver.

The barque lay still upon her shield, her dew-wet sails like purple blinds across the window of the sun ; her rigging gleaming. No movement on her decks, though. One figure seated with head bowed upon his arm and dawn climbing swiftly to burnish all that tracery of ropes and spars circling upon the shield.

She was the centre of it and had for circumference clouds which were ranged opalescent and luminous, tier beyond tier all round her. . . . Clouds without life ; not angry but drugged, crammed with electricity ; growing, fading, finding new contours as the hours emerged ; clouds which threw shadows upon the sea and were the only things that moved.

For a week she had lain thus and King had been alone—listening often for the swift rush of feet

which had become at length a dread. The calm was absolute now. No squalls troubled him ; only the long heave of distant trades made flickering movement among the sails. The sun which had killed the trades in this region was pushing north to warm England, the home for which this man had striven all his days—England the unready, the forgetful, but beautiful always and beloved.

The barque with the square stern, quarter-galleries and great square ports which Herman had bought was grown upon the seascape. The captain he had found her sat with bowed head beside the skylight. The grass which clung to her sides slobbered evenly upon the sea as moss and weeds cling to the boulders in a mountain stream. Sometimes fish disturbed the placid surface ; sometimes it blinked like windows lighted by the sun. And at night came the swift lines of fire ; the flashes which showed pirouette and dive, the movements of hunted things who clung to life as King clung, and would escape. Now all was still. Nothing more still than the man sitting there with his head bowed upon a raised arm.

. . . .

They were nearing the Line. Yesterday at noon King had brought up his sextant to take sights. 4° 0′ south latitude was the result he obtained. Longitude 11° 4′ west. Ascension two hundred and ninety miles sou'-sou'-west.

Current carrying the ship due east at one and a half knots an hour. No islands, no land anywhere nearer than Ascension, and Ascension as one of the tribes which are lost.

He came up from the cabin after laying off this position on the chart and walked a while, talking. Yet no one walked beside him. He came near the rabbit hutch and stood a moment, saying: "Sou'-sou'-west . . . but out of touch. . . . Quite. Two hundred and ninety miles—my God!" and remained listening, halted quite suddenly in his walk.

The rabbits came to the edge of their run to ask for food on hearing his voice. No one else heard now, for King was alone on board. The last man . . . for eight or ten days the last man, one who already had learned the tricks of those who lack companionship. He was restless. He never stayed long in one place. He glanced often over his shoulder. He was consumed by the burden of his days and talked of it as he walked . . . sometimes to the rabbits.

He came close now and saw they were hungry. He took up a doe and fondled her, put her back and seized one of those whose ears were short, like rats' ears. He knew this was not a rabbit, yet he put it back also and went away to the fore-peak to fetch food. And as he delved, filling a bucket, the light he carried shone on a trail which made him drop the scoop. He followed it until it ended in the ship's eyes. There it pierced the

deck with a hole, jagged, rough, with the marks of teeth.

The last trail ! He sang the words in his joy. The last trail, and he had discovered it ! He heard the muffled shout he made and crept out with leaping pulses—but ashamed. He climbed on deck and saw the exit. It was plain. At last ! at last !

Lang had died while they still searched for it. Sails had more than suspected one existed there ; but they had not discovered it—some trick in the light, he supposed. Now it was plain—a blind man could see it, and King moved away, chuckling, to cover it. Chuckling, forgetful of rabbits clamouring for food, impressed by an immense certitude that this was the last trail. He hurried to the paint locker chattering of his find, took the pot of mixed white lead, putty, broken glass and tacks with him, and returned to the fo'c'sle. He got on his knees and crept under a dim shelf which carried shackles and bits of old iron, far in the bow of the ship ; struggled into position and plastered the hole with deadliness ; covered it with wood and heaped old iron upon it.

He emerged wrenched and with torn knuckles, considering the fright of his enemies when they returned. How they would worry at the stuff, soft, sticky still, with nails and glass which would tear their jaws and slay. How others would press in from behind, others, still others, until there was a block, when they would fight, tear with tooth and

claw to free the entry which led to that railed-off space where rabbits still lived pampered, with a sufficiency of food.

Then, when he had completed his task, he went aft and sat upon the skylight, wrote a while in his log, and dozed.

He was weary. He had been on deck all night and now required food even as those pampered ones in the pen. Latterly he had decided to stay on deck at night in order that if vessels came near he might see their lights. He would sleep when the sun was high, throwing rays which charred. At the mizzen truck was a signal, " N.C." which said : " In distress, want assistance." At the fore the Yellow Angel in permanent session at the peak, aft, the red flag of the merchant service, jack down.

Any ship that passed by day would see those signals, he argued, and would call him.

But the *Tiger* was far from the track of ships, idle in a current that carried her hourly towards the Bights of Benin and Biafra. There it would turn and, following the trend of the coast, flow south, then sou'-west, west—until the dismal circle was complete and the ship would again emerge upon the trades. Months of drifting. Years in the back waters of an ocean current, always becoming more sluggish, a wreck aloft, as though, like Vanderdecken, her captain had sold his soul to the devil and must pay.

. . . .

King began to feel the weight of his burden when, with two companions left to aid him, they sagged past Ascension and knew that already the current had gripped them.

For days previous to that disaster they had been without any steady wind, working, weak as they were, to head always for the island. But squalls when they came often pushed them north instead of east ; thunder, rain and the doldrums kept them impotent.

With a full crew King could have reached Ascension ; with men to work the ship the island would not have been lost to them ; the white ensign out of reach. It did not tantalise them to pass it—they left it so far it was unseen.

. . . .

A week after Lang's death King was facing the end, writing his log, feeding the rabbits, talking to them.

He used to sit on deck in the early morning with his book in his lap and jot down details of the day's work. Sometimes he had little to say. Sometimes the swift rush of feet disturbed him and he would rise, make for the hutch, seeking to track his enemies. They were becoming bold. Always he had been too late to discover their trail. Always after that he came back and noted what he had heard—" a rush of feet. Something small, going very fast, a number of them together."

He wrote once that he would have destroyed the hutch and turned its occupants loose long

since, but that it was a point upon which the trails converged and it seemed necessary to keep it as a lure . . . And now the rabbits were his companions.

. . . .

Again a day dawned.

Calm still, the brazen sun scarce two degrees from the horizon, the sea glowing, a track like a path lifted into a curve and scintillating where it lay beneath the sun—while King reclined on the skylight, his feet up, his head upon a pillow.

Over him was a small awning which yesterday he had rigged to shield him from the sun. It lay across the boom and came down on either side to the ship's rail, where it was lashed. Hitherto he had gone into his cabin to sleep ; but yesterday he had found and plugged the last trail. No sound of feet had since been heard. He decided it would be easier to sleep on deck, easier if a ship came near, easier if . . . if anything happened to . . . put him out of his stride.

So he rigged his awning, wrote his log and now lay there in the hot shadow of it with a pillow beneath his head.

He felt so secure since he had discovered the last trail and blocked it that he did not wake when the feet came up the ladder, raced past him, curved and entered the hutch. He did not know they could enter the hutch. He supposed as the rabbits remained untouched by disease they were immune. He did not know the infection pre-

ferred man and would only pass to the lesser organisms when the greater were destroyed.

King was becoming weaker. The long vigil had sapped both strength and courage. It was like solitary confinement to be alone on that ship, the most terrible of punishments. He moved in a world from which he had seen all aid withdrawn ; but there was no touch of bitterness in what he wrote. The thing happened—that was all, and at the moment his one care was to avoid being trapped while asleep. It seemed sometimes that he magnified the power of his enemies ; yet just now he had not heard their approach. The awning screened him from the sun, and the luxury of no longer being compelled to sleep with senses alert had produced slumber to which for weeks he had been a stranger.

His enemies, too, were secure within the hutch, feeding ; boldly snapping at the rabbits, running hither and thither among those curious atavistic specimens upon which he had commented. Then, when they had cleaned the hutch of crushed biscuit, bran and grain, they emerged upon the deck and swept aft to the wheel, some large, nearly as large as the rabbits, the rest small. They clambered upon the gratings which were beside it, standing up, sniffing the air, then leaped about playing touch through the spokes of the wheel.

They sharpened their teeth upon its brasses, clawed and with one mind dashed away, again going forward. They came to look at this captain

who was alone. They stood up beside the skylight sniffing him. He did not move. Then one of the largest leaped upon the seat, climbed the brasses and stood nose in air above him. One crept very near his throat. The man's muscles twitched as though the thing's whiskers had tickled him. He brushed his face swiftly and sat up—awake, staring.

His enemies were gone ; but the rush they made chained him as never before.

. . . .

Again he searched to find evidence of their approach and exit. All day he pried and levered in odd corners of the deck and cabins ; but he found no trace. And when at length the sun drew near its setting he came aft and sat upon the hutch, questioning audibly what he must do. He saw then that the hutch contained no food ; how the rabbits came near, asking with kicks and leaping why they went hungry to bed. He took pity on their manœuvres, went away and presently returned with a bucket which was filled. He set this in the centre of the run and sat to watch as the sun dipped. Presently he dozed.

. . . .

The swish of hurrying feet ; feet pattering at full gallop on decks hot and dry and still ; feet moving with a remorseless control and rhythm, touched him so closely that for a moment as he leaped upright his heart stumbled, and he leaned faint upon the capstan. He strove to lift his legs,

to move away from contact ; but he could not climb. His muscles became rigid. Cramp seized him. He fell beside the hutch and lay for a while quite still.

He did not sleep, nor was he stunned ; but something had happened to him and his head ached.

Suddenly, swiftly, it dawned upon him as he lay splayed, that the plague had claimed him and he would die. He felt cold. His hair shrank at the roots. He became more urgent to rise, to get up and draw away from contact with his enemies.

They whisked about him in a wide circle which embraced the capstan, coming nearer. They seemed to recognise his impotence. The bolder among them drew close and sniffed as they raced past. Little squeals broke from them ; but King lay still, curled in a ball, still as though he, too, had joined his men and could feel no more. . . . They swept so near he could have struck ; but his strength was gone, and as he watched they swerved and entered the hutch.

He saw then how they came, and a smile broke through to torture him. He moved, acknowledging this, and in the new silence his strength returned. He sat up, rubbing industriously his legs. He seemed amazed, yet presently he rose and stood listening. No sound ! He drew himself painfully to the companion, got down the stairs, found brandy, drank and fell prone.

. . . .

He was standing in his cabin when the sun rose. His head was wet, his hair dripped when he discovered that he stood, that he was on his feet. He was beside a basin repeating a formula about getting a rub down ; holding a towel with which he was rubbing his head . . . while in the basin was water which in some way he must have poured. He had no knowledge of these things. He saw the daylight glancing in at his ports ; felt that his throat was on fire and stooped over the basin to drink. Then quite irrationally he climbed the companion stairs and reached the deck.

A rush of feet met him as he came near the hutch. He could not follow. This search must go by default ; his strength was gone. He must find some place where he could lie down ; some place where the feet could not come. He glanced at the sea shimmering alongside. No. Somewhere high up. . . . Ah ! that was it. High up—nearer the stars.

He looked aloft.

The sails hung like shutters, wet and heavy with dew. They lay across the sun's path. He could not see beyond.

He crept forward, holding by the rail. Up ! High up ! Somewhere high . . . high, he must climb. He reached the ladder, preparing to descend to the main deck, and suddenly halted.

He turned back and seized the wire netting of the hutch in both hands and pulled. He seemed

suddenly to be endowed with fury, with the strength of ten. The wire came away and with it the teak wood stanchions which held it. He flung them from him, calling aloud : "Free ! Free !" and returned to the ladder, gingerly descending.

He came to a spar which lay along the rail and climbed upon it, looking up. He reached the rigging and began to mount. Five ladders, all linked for him to escape, were there for him to choose. He took the centre and halted breathless half way to the top. He leaned a while, resting with face and chest close pressed upon the ratlines. He seemed in peril of falling twice ; but he did not fall—he climbed and reached the top, not over the futtock shrouds ; but by way of the lubber's hole. It sufficed. He lay down panting upon the broad, semi-circular floor of the top and took rest.

He desired to climb higher ; but his strength was gone. He lay down again and pulled up a line he had released. This he passed round his waist and made fast to the rigging. Again he lay down.

That night when the sun was gone strange songs came from the top—sounds which kept the feet scampering in the dark, far, far down on deck.

. . . .

The sun rose on calm, and sank behind clouds which flamed when day was done.

No sound came from the top. The man's

enemies ranged at will through cabin and hold searching for food. For some reason it appeared none was forthcoming . . . and that night the rabbits died.

. . . .

Again the sun. A blaze of light, golden, drawing a pathway from earth to heaven, and a great shout welcoming it from high up there amidst the rigging and spars.

It sounded like a challenge.

A yellow-grey marmot sitting aft upon the wheel box turned from preening his whiskers to listen. Another leaped to join him.

Together they gambolled like kittens before a fire. And the rats who were their companions wheeled about, considering how they might attack them.

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